

CITY OF ATOMS:
EN-RACINATING MEDIA ART AND PUBLIC SPACE IN ATLANTA

A Thesis
Presented to
The Academic Faculty

by

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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science in the
School of Literature, Communication and Culture

Georgia Institute of Technology
2010

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Date Approved: April 2, 2010

To Eddie, my love and light

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Carl DiSalvo for his close guidance and mentorship throughout this process. I would also like to thank my father for providing context and helping me think through the early stages of developing an approach and a topic. Daniel Gaetán was invaluable in taking much of the grunt work of daily life off my plate so that I could concentrate on writing. Finally, the artists whose work I have profiled—Neil Fried, Monica Duncan, Karyn Lu, Lila King and Beth Lilly were all extremely generous with their time and their ideas.

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SUMMARY

Designers of information communication technologies (ICTs) in public space often fall into the trap of designing only for the “flâneur,” an unembedded mobile subject in the generic global city. They deracinate the experience of space and support the global flâneur as the paradigmatic deracinated subject. In this thesis I propose a specific vision of “en-racinating” media, that is media that takes the specificity of place seriously. A careful consideration of public art can help us in this endeavor by leveraging the artistic notion of “site specificity” in the most culturally grounded meaning of the term. I examine three public digital media/information-based public art works through the lens of urban informatics in order to see how the works do or do not en-racinate experience in a specific city: Atlanta.

CHAPTER 1

PROLOGUE:

YES, VIRGINIA, THERE IS A DIGITAL MEDIA ART WORLD

While researching *City of Atoms*, I received one reaction from classmates and academic colleagues more than any other, a reaction that in fact echoed even among some of the committee members to whom I initially presented the topics of research that would eventually become this thesis. In its bluntest form the reaction usually sounded something like: “You mean there’s digital media public art in Atlanta?”



1.1 Duncan and Fried, *Palimpsest*, performance view. Courtesy Neil Fried.

Digital media art in Atlanta suffers the same invisibility that many other cultural forms suffer in this city. Its disintegrated urban fabric, its lack of population density, and its many social cleavages and physical boundaries make for a highly illegible city (Haynie and Peponis 11). It can be grasped neither spatially nor culturally in the quasi-coherent ways that many major US cities can. Worse, this strange ubiquitous invisibility means that cultural practices throughout the city find themselves beyond the pale of even culturally literate people such as the students and faculty at the Georgia Institute of Technology, vanishing through accidents of geography and demographics. As in most cities, Atlantans seem to take the commonsense notion that if it exists and is relevant, they should hear about it. And although the works of art I write about here are small scale by almost any measure, that commonsense notion is perhaps less true in Atlanta than in any other city I have lived in.¹

As an analyzer of culture, I am fascinated by whatever it is about Atlanta that produces this condition of invisibility, which seems to be if not unique to Atlanta, at least highly characteristic of the city. As an arts writer I am fascinated by how artists deal with the difficult question of place in Atlanta and of making themselves visible, as artists thrive on visibility. And as a digital media analyst I am interested in what other fields within the information sciences and ubiquitous computing can learn from artists' struggles with spatial logics often working at cross-purposes to one another.

These are the animating questions behind *City of Atoms*. My hope is to render these public art works and these design practices a little more visible, to make such

¹ I have resided for significant amounts of time in Los Angeles, CA; Paris, France; Boston, MA; New York City; Austin, TX; and Atlanta, GA.

artistic engagements seem a little less far-fetched. I hope to provide scaffolding for others interested in how Atlanta operates spatially and culturally, in the hopes that public interventions that transpire within the city may be done more humanely and with a broader palette of critical resources. But I also hope to encourage digital media design practice to see place as more than just a neutral backdrop for the installation of technologies. I endorse a philosophy of humility before urban spaces and wish to encourage a turn to take seriously the innumerable lives and histories invested in them.

CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCTION

Atlanta was the launching pad of the distributed downtown; downtown had exploded. Once atomized, its autonomous particles could go anywhere; they gravitated opportunistically toward points of freedom, cheapness, easy access, diminished contextual nuisance. Millions of fragments landed in primeval forests sometimes connected to highways, sometimes to nothing at all.

—Rem Koolhaas, “Atlanta: A Reading”

Atlanta was a megacity before megacities. Although its population of just under 4 million² could fit within Tokyo more than seven times over, Atlanta shares one of the spatial features most indicative of the megacity as a new urban form: global connection, local disconnection. Like the true megacities—Tokyo, São Paulo, New York City—Atlanta is globally connected through networks of international travel and the transnational flow of capital, yet its internal spatial and social discontinuities manifest in a disjunctive patchwork of discontinuous land use patterns and isolation of that portion of the population irrelevant to the needs of global information networks (Castells, *Network Society* 404).

These discontinuities have been made possible by the new technological and communication infrastructures rapidly reconfiguring both the physical and the social

² Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau statistic for the 10-county metropolitan area.

spaces of cities generally. Amazon.com, for example, centralizes warehousing and shipping of all kinds of consumer goods from a few key nodes, while radically decentralizing the activities of browsing and purchasing (Mitchell). These new economic and physical arrangements set off new behavioral patterns, which in turn co-evolve with new relationships to space and among people. The computer code that powers Amazon.com in a very real sense powers a whole new set of social relationships.

In *City of Atoms*, I attempt to parse one aspect of this mechanism. Using the figure of the nineteenth-century Parisian flâneur, I argue that much of the design of locative information communication technologies (ICTs) privileges an unembedded, generically global, mobile subject. I argue further that these ICTs deracinate the experience of space, and that designers need specific alternative frameworks for producing “en-racinating” media, that is media that tends to produce an experience of space as particular and grounded rather than as generic. Although the technology of the media itself may be identical to that of any other ICT, its design and deployment will encourage embedded, en-racinated forms of interaction.

As far as I can tell the term “en-racinating” has never been used in this context and is my innovation here. It is obviously a backformation from the word “deracinated,” and I have chosen to use it for the way it conjures images of actively embedding and implantation. It insists that the action of “en-racinating” demands an active engagement and conscious thought. Things don’t just “end up” that way. Although other words exist that point to the same end state—“grounded” and “rooted” for example—I prefer “en-racinating” for the way it highlights process and points to the metaphysical ill (deracination) as much as to its cure.

Because artists have a robust notion of site-specificity, I interrogate three Atlanta-based works of digital media and information-based public art for the ways in which they grapple with the specific place(s) of Atlanta. I delineate the ways in which they may constitute en-racinating media and the ways in which they may not. In particular, I highlight the theme of mobility where appropriate in helping to understand how they encounter urban space and how spectators encounter the art works. Through this process, I attempt to suggest the complexity of interplay between technologies and the specific spaces they inhabit in order to move toward a framework of en-racinating media for public-space ICTs generally.

Designing for Flânerie

Early in the history of the design of ICTs that had been freed from the desktop, the quest for the global subject had already begun. Mainwaring, Anderson and Chang's research for Intel (2005) explicitly posited the ideal users as "young professionals" living in London, Los Angeles, and Tokyo. Their urban habits deemed to be sufficiently alike, the generic, global ubiquitous computing user was born by means of his paradigmatic space, which was already in the midst of formation: the generic, global city served by the generic urban computing system.

Within a few short years, a welter of technologies, services, and systems multiplied to serve this charismatic generic, young, global gogetter. An exemplary case is

The Go Game, based in San Francisco.³ Through a variety of game structures, the *Go Game* staff organizes corporate or private teams of 3 to several thousand members to undertake “missions” downloaded to team members’ cell phones. Most games amount to some version of a scavenger hunt wherein players move about the city in search of clues, activities, and objects. Although the web site speaks of “interaction” with the city, all of the examples offered require only that the players find something (e.g., a clue), identify something (e.g., a mural), or undertake an unrelated activity (e.g, create an ad campaign). At times even people are meant to be assimilated into the game space as tokens or props (e.g, “Gain the trust of a total stranger.”)

Players are invited into a series of low- or no-obligation interactions with the city, in which the real space they encounter with its encoded logics and histories are entirely supplanted with the fictional space of the game, while players remain utterly unaware of how they are positioned against the social and economic arrangements that that mobility implies. In short, players are encouraged to experience space as deracinated, a generic game board for the play of mobile fantasies. This is the ICT user constructed as latter-day flâneur. ICTs that uphold these practices can be said to be *designs for flânerie*.

As against these practices, I advocate en-racinating media, which would have precisely the opposite characteristics: encouraging experience specific to the social, political, or aesthetic conditions of the space and rendering opaque rather than transparent the constituents of mobility.

³ The entire description that follows is based on information available at the *Go Game* web site at www.thegogame.com.



2.1 Still from *The Go Game*, from Go Game web site.

Urban Informatics

This thesis contributes to the body of research in urban informatics. Urban informatics lies at the intersection of three broad academic practices: “the social (media studies, communication studies, cultural studies, etc.), the urban (urban studies, urban planning, architecture, etc.), and the technical (computer science, software design, human-computer interaction, etc.)” (Foth xxix). Moreover, urban informatics places its primary emphasis on investigating the socio-cultural and economic matrix in which people and technologies are co-embedded in urban spaces, rather than, say, the

engineering challenges of urban computing or the hermeneutics of ICTs as cultural or literary artifacts.

According to Foth, the term “urban informatics” dates from a 2003 article titled “Cities, Swarms, Cell Phones: The Birth of Urban Informatics” in which Howard Rheingold interviewed Anthony Townsend, then an early exponent of the study of the effect of technological infrastructures on social patterns. Since that time, urban informatics has been home to an increasing number of “nomadic” researchers whose practices comprehend multiple threads of inquiry that often bridge the so-called silos of academia (xxix).

One thread within this field is the close analysis of particular cities and the techno-social systems that condition life within them. Studies have been made of major world cities such as San Francisco, New York, and Seoul, as well as cities further down the hierarchy of nodes in the global network, e.g., Bangkok and Durban.

City of Atoms has a unique contribution to make to this part of the dialog. As the self-anointed capital of the new south, Atlanta is both provincial and cosmopolitan, both local and global. Atlanta was a megacity before its time and has remained a small town long after its own expiration date. As a unique character in the global ecology of cities, Atlanta may serve as a case study of contradictions and a paragon of the posturban condition (Koolhaas).

Research Approach

Honoring the multidisciplinary orientation of urban informatics, I draw from the literatures of sociology, history, urban design and architecture, as well as from the urban

informatics and information science literatures generally. I have also sought to supplement my research with fiction, particularly fiction about the urban space of Atlanta, in order to arrive at a poetics of the urban that might give me access to ideas unavailable through empirical or theoretical research.

Chapters 6 through 8 of this study comprise close readings of three digital media artistic interventions in Atlanta: Neil Fried and Monica Duncan's *Palimpsest*, Karen Y. Lu and Lila King's *Echo Atlanta*, and Beth Lilly's *The Oracle @ WiFi*. In order to understand these works, I have not only reviewed whatever supporting documentation I was able to obtain, I also witnessed or interacted with all three projects in the spaces in which they were presented.⁴ I furthermore interviewed four of the five artists (Monica Duncan was out of state during the entire interview and research period) for insight into their motivations and intentions, whether ultimately realized or not.

City of Atoms

Atlanta as a city of atoms has two contradictory meanings. The first meaning refers to Richard Sennett's apocalyptic analysis of the city whose public domain has given out:

Think, for instance, of what a city of atoms, with a space for each class to live, for each race to live, for each class and race to work, means for attempts at racial or

⁴ I did not personally receive a fortune telling from Beth Lilly whose *The Oracle @ WiFi* is a cell-phone based fortune-telling system. I did however see the work, which consisted of readings printed as large scale photographs, presented in a gallery setting.

class integration, either in education or in leisure: displacement and invasion must become the actual experiences involved in the supposed experience of intergroup rapprochement. . . . The atomizing of the city has put a practical end to an essential component of public space: the overlay function in a single territory, which creates complexities of experience on that turf. (297)

Castells sounds a similar note:

The development of this increasingly individualized world, atomized in individual homes, and/or grouped in segregated, homogeneous communities, both at the top and bottom of the social ladder, is tantamount to the breaking of the urban contract: an urban contract by which citizens from different cultures, and with different resources, agreed to be citizens; that is part of a shared culture, and institutions, where conflicts were part of life, but where a common ground could be found. (*Culture of Cities* 377)

Atlanta embodies this atomized condition as thoroughly as any city. Lacking the overlay function, relatively homogeneous groups—or worse, individual persons—make of space a wholly private construct with little of the shared symbolic language on which democratic engagement depends.

Castells identifies a new culture of cities that is not merely a romantic throwback to pre-digital cities, but one that integrates electronic communications with the “space of places” that have traditionally defined cities. Within this paradigm, public art holds a key

position to help re-complicate and re-layer our experience of public space against the atomizing effects of new communications media. It is part of:

a new monumentality, able to provide symbolic meaning to spatial forms, marking in terms of meaning the metropolitan sprawl. Public art, singular architecture, urban design oriented to the metropolitan infrastructure . . . are critical devices to restore meaning in the new city form. (*Culture of Cities* 383)

The effects of such artifacts are not strictly instrumental; artwork in particular need not be reduced solely to its ability to accomplish this or that social outcome. We can, however, read such works and ask what habits of thinking and feeling they tend to produce, among other questions. Do they add to or subtract from the possibility of shared, common discourse?

But a “City of Atoms” has another more positive meaning. Here, I refer to the cliché that our world has moved from atoms to bits, that the virtual and the digital have supplanted the real in our cities and in our lives. By identifying Atlanta as a city of atoms, I insist on the extent to which it is still an actual and specific place, full of actual and specific people. As Townsend remarks: “Despite the power of digital networks, so much of our lives is still negotiated from the meter or so of intimate and personal space that separates faces” (*Locative-Media Artists* 345). Even as they are ignored and sequestered by the power of global capital flows, these populations still live somewhere. We do indeed exist.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

Urban informatics offer research methods and instruments that become the microscope of urban anatomy.

—*Marcus Foth*, Handbook of Research on Urban Informatics:
The Practice and Promise of the Real-Time City

As a multidisciplinary research field, urban informatics research falls at the intersection of the digital information sciences, urban studies, and the social sciences with significant influence from design research and scholarship. A small body of literature has emerged over the past half-decade that has been undertaken explicitly under the rubric of this emerging field. Meanwhile, a longer and broader tradition of research in the information processing needs and capacities of cities both predates and surrounds urban informatics, supplying much of the emerging field's rhetoric and research methods. In this literature review, I will treat as appropriate for consideration any research that shares the concerns and biases of urban informatics research—including the explicit emphasis on urban social conditions—even if not undertaken as a self-conscious contribution to that research program.

Because this thesis considers works of digital media art in Atlanta's public space, my review of previous research will focus largely on scholarship that has advanced theories of digital artifacts in public space or that analyzes the deployment of specific artifacts of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in public space. I have

further biased my review toward researchers who have treated the subject of new media art as opposed to other kinds of urban interfaces and appliances.

The arc of research in this field recounts a trajectory toward an ever more particular understanding of public space. Theoretical approaches begin with the assertion that any space is more than simply a generic vacuum into which ubiquitous computing can be inserted and end with the most recent scholarship advancing deeply problematized notions of space and its relationship to layers of digital media that are embedded within them. The field still lacks, however, a concrete consciousness around affirmative design for particular places over and above generic, global spaces. I will describe a wide swath of this research here and then based on these descriptions attempt to sketch a provisional set of criteria by which we might rigorously assess three digital media public art works in Atlanta.

Theories of Urban Informatics in Public Space

Dourish and Bell's "The Infrastructure of Experience and the Experience of Infrastructure: Meaning and Structure in Everyday Encounters with Space" delineates the ways in which ubiquitous computing relates to the spaces it occupies. Space, the researchers find, is not experienced as a neutral ground on which computing technologies respond only to the momentum of their internal logics, but is instead experienced through various cultural, historical and political lenses that organize the social meanings mapped onto our interactions with the technology deployed there. The researchers advocate installing ubiquitous computing systems within these cultural, historical, and political

frameworks—these complex infrastructures—rather than attempt to negate or collapse them.

In this study, Dourish and Bell provide a critical foundation for understanding technology as a cultural artifact coextensive with other cultural practices. However, their concern here is primarily functional. In their analysis, ubiquitous technologies are deemed to have structure but no content. The tacit assumption is that any technology that properly accounts for the cultural infrastructures it operates through is necessarily a salutary one.

Brown's "The City Streets" (in Paulos et al.) moves us closer to the consideration of a public realm by accounting for the streets as a specific form of space. Although gaming and other urban informatics computing applications have a long history of use in public space, little consideration had been given to the social space of the street as generically distinct from a living room or an office. Citing Simmel, Goffman, and others, Brown begins to outline the concerns of design for street space: the physical presence of strangers, the existence of social codes, the mere idea of local difference. While adding a level of resolution to Dourish and Bell's account of space in terms of the constraints inherent in public space, Brown nevertheless still draws no distinction in how between differential content may produce differential social effects.

In "Sentient Cities: Ambient Intelligence and Politics of Urban Space" (2007) Crang and Graham fill gaps left by Dourish and Bell and by Brown by offering a typology of methods by which ICTs engage public space, finding that the mere fact of a technology being fully functional does not mean that it is necessarily the technology we would wish to have deployed in our cities. Indeed, it may be the very seamlessness of its

functionality that makes the technology potentially problematic. The authors focus on three key purposes to which the animation of public spaces with digital technology has been put: (1) digitally enabled, seamless consumption in the marketplace of goods; (2) military fantasies of social omniscience through surveillance in service of the so-called War on Terror; and (3) efforts by artists to “re-enchant” human connections to urban space through oppositional uses of technology. The third of these trends is most relevant to this study.

Crang and Graham echo calls from Kraan (2006) and others for artists to diversify the potential social uses of ubiquitous computing technologies by deploying them in ways that subvert dominant commercial and military visions of public space. They describe a number of works executed by artists and activists that divert technology toward critical practices that complicate or defamiliarize their presumed audience’s relationship to public space. Among these, *Greenwich Emotion Map* and *San Francisco Emotion Map* use bio-feedback devices and a Google mashup to create an online map showing where a community exhibits greater and lesser amounts of stress. *Pedestrian: A Walking Tour for Multiple Voices and Portable Phones—New York City* allows a limited number of audience members to listen to three separate performers hold personal, intimate conversations on cell phones connected through a conference call service. The audience members listen to all three performers while following just one who acts as a guide through the city. *[murmur]* (called “Murmure” here) invites people in major cities around Canada to tag a web-based map with personal stories of “intimate commemoration” as a way of countering dominant, top-down narratives of particular spaces with vernacular, bottom-up stories of everyday histories. Other projects such as *Botfighters* and *Mogi*

Mogi seek to transform the city into a pervasive game board, a backdrop for connecting strangers through imaginative play. Crang and Graham nominate these and similar projects as catalysts for “enriched community formation” acting as “turbulence” (811) to disturb the static and hegemonic visions of community that commercial and military fantasies impose on urban space.



3.1 Pedestrian: *A Walking Tour for Multiple Voices and Portable Phones*—New York City, photo from video still shot by Pierre Degaille 2005.

Although the researchers account for both the political content and political implications of technologies that inhabit urban space generically, there is little analysis of the projects held up as counter-hegemonic either in terms of their efficacy (that is, do they in fact produce the social effects claimed for them) or in terms of the assumptions underlying their design. In many ways, we are presented with the inverse of the problem

we encounter in Dourish and Bell—here we have analysis of the theoretical political implications of the content with little account of how these sociotechnical systems might actually ramify through the vast web of cultural, social, historical and political practices that precede them. We are left to assume that resistive technologies can transform spatial experience without reference to the other determinants that organize that experience.

Furthermore, by using the metaphor of “re-enchantment” the researchers risk creating a myth of a golden age of urban habitation that never existed. In fact, throughout the history of human settlement, inhabited space has coevolved through the mutual exertion of social and technological forces upon one another in various states of dynamic disequilibria (Mitchell; Townsend, *Locative-Media Artists*).



3.2 *BotFighters* screen capture.

Combining a concern with content and a concern with structure while relying on no golden age myth, Williams, Robles and Dourish propose a critical re-evaluation of

ICT design values in “Urbane-ing the City: Examining and Refining the Assumptions Behind Urban Informatics” (in Foth, 2009). Citing Simmel, Durkheim and others, the researchers locate the origins of prevailing contemporary assumptions about the city in a history of sociology carried out in newly industrialized Western European cities of the nineteenth century. The city even today is understood generically as “a dense ecology of strangers,” requiring a technological response to “cure” the alienation endemic to it. For this reason, ICTs commonly exhibit an obsession with realizing latent social networks and converting any and all strangers in the surrounding urban space into “friends.” They are obsessed with connection. Furthermore, social interaction and knowledge in the city are seen as a matter of engaging in low-obligation, anonymous, voyeuristic interactions across the city as a backdrop for almost limitless and unproblematic mobility through it.

Together these philosophical pillars form the world view of the nineteenth century Parisian flâneur as exemplified by Baudelaire and other poets and artists. The flâneur is a privileged, imminently mobile subject who wanders the city carefully observing, yet not engaging with the social sphere. He⁵ further presumes that his voyeuristic acts of observation lead to knowledge of social reality, particularly of the poor and powerless. These prevailing concepts lead designers to “enable flânerie” through design, allowing users to ignore the social, political, and economic arrangements that make their use of these technologies possible. Worse, in the opinion of the researchers, designers use flânerie as a research method, substituting imagination and speculation for social engagement.

⁵ My use of the gendered pronoun here is intentional. The figure of the flâneur will be taken up in more detail in Chapter 2.

As a way out of this politically freighted position, the researchers advocate a shift of focus from urban form to urban experience. Rather than assuming that the meaning of public space, social relations, and physical mobility are identical in similarly formed “global cities,” they insist upon the particularity of cities and advocate design in response to local needs and conditions as assessed through engagement with the social experience of local populations. They furthermore point to this approach as a way to account for divergent experiences among populations even within the same space. They term this practice “attending to positionality,” a perspective which “distinguishes technologies that take the urban seriously from those that merely consider the city as a place where technologies are used” (7).

Although their assessment of flânerie as politically regressive is compelling, the researchers are overzealous in evaluating as problematic particular characteristics of the flâneur when separating these out from other, related characteristics. In analyzing the *Undersound* music sharing system, for example, they conclude that because the system favors the “mobile practices of middle and upper-middle class consumers, existing within a . . . rhythm of travel, commute, work, and leisure,” that the system represents a construction of the user as latter-day flâneur. However, as I will demonstrate more specifically in Chapter 4, this represents an overly broad interpretation of flânerie. The flâneur is precisely not the working stiff of the middle class whose movements are largely dictated by economic necessity and the inconvenient patterns of city construction largely beyond her or his control (Castells, 1999). To the contrary, the flâneur, free of economic constraint (even if through massive credit as was Baudelaire), exercises complete discretion in his mobility, often choosing various wildly inefficient and unproductive

patterns of movement totally by choice. Such interpretive overreach does little to bolster the central point, which nevertheless remains convincing: that a total devotion to the consumer as flâneur unnecessarily restricts the range of urban experiences technologists might design for.

Williams, Robles, and Dourish cite Paulos and Goodman's San Francisco based research on the "familiar stranger" (2004) as an exception to ICTs that consider the city only as a dense ecology of strangers requiring the intrusion of technology to turn those strangers into friends. "The Familiar Stranger: Anxiety, Comfort, and Play in Public Places" lays out the groundwork for Jabberwocky, a proposed digital device for keeping track of the many people with whom one comes into contact on a regular basis in a city such as San Francisco, but whom one nevertheless has never met—that is, those who are familiar and yet are strangers. Such familiar strangers are critical to a sense of comfort and a sense of place. Notably, Jabberwocky does not attempt to convert strangers into friends, but rather merely documents their presence either synchronously or asynchronously.

However, if Paulos and Goodman avoid the obsession with friend-making exhibited by other technologies, they do in equal measure give way to the flâneur's pattern of projecting imagined scenarios onto unwitting strangers by way of disengaged voyeurism. Supporting such projections is in fact almost an explicit goal of the design research. Far from denying voyeurism, the researchers foreground it as an entirely acceptable activity, indeed as a healthy component of a sense of connection to place:

It is also not uncommon for people to personalize their Familiar Strangers by giving them names and/or concocting fictitious stories and backgrounds of their personal lives. The epiphany of the Familiar Stranger relationship is when an individual realizes that they are likely someone else's Familiar Stranger, complete with names and stories.

My goal here is not to judge whether this practice is a good one or a bad one. Rather, I mean only to foreground the extent to which it figures into the design of the system. Inexplicably, Williams et al. seem to ignore Paulos and Goodman's direct invocation of flâneur tactics as part and parcel of the conceptual substrate of their Jabberwocky system.

This oversight, however, points to an unresolved tension in Williams, Robles and Dourish's argument. Nowhere do the authors accuse the ICTs they interrogate of *generating* a flâneur impulse in their users. Such an impulse is deemed to arise from somewhere else; urban informatics technologies merely exploit or support it in certain cases. Indeed Paulos and Goodman present some evidence that at least one aspect of flânerie continues to be widely practiced with or without technological support. This leads to the question, unasked by Williams et al., of whether "enabling flânerie" may be a matter of complex tensions within the design of a technology more than a matter of an absolute function of the technology. That is, a technology may well reify the flâneur's position in some ways and undermine it in other ways.

Townsend in "Locative-Media Artists in the Contested-Aware City," begins to provide a specific ontology for the type of media that would attend to positionality in the way Williams et al., call for. In this article, he narrows the focus to context-aware media

devices and how artists and activists are using them in a “bottom-up” fashion to construct culturally complex spaces in ways “ideologically, socially, and economically” superior to top-down approaches (346). Deriving from centralized command-and-control structures, such as state governments, top-down media uses tend to construe cultural complexity as a obstacle and spatial particularity as a nuisance.

Townsend makes a compelling argument, but he, too, cites Jabberwocky as exemplary of the bottom-up technology. But it is difficult to see how research from one of the world’s largest technology companies (Intel) designed to keep track of people in urban space represents an ideological victory over, say, and RFID-enabled toll booth reader. What’s needed is not merely an account of structure, nor merely of content, but a complex examination of the internal tensions activated within a technology as it confronts and plays out in a particular urban space.

Several other studies advance theories of technology in public space that are fruitful for this research. Two research papers examine the deployment of computing technologies in urban contexts other than first-world, western cities: Choi and Greenfield in “To Connect and Flow in Seoul: Ubiquitous Technologies, Urban Infrastructure and Everyday Life in the Contemporary Korean City” and Odendaal in “Creating an Analytical Lens for Understanding Digital Networks in Urban South Africa.” Both studies underscore the sometimes surprising (to Western, first-world sensibilities) relationships between digital technologies and the local political and social conditions into which they are introduced.

Choi and Greenfield describe the urban creek Cheonggyecheon in Seoul as a synecdoche for a city whose rapid development has led to a condition of computational

ubiquity deployed in the service of widespread desires for constant personal connection, unlimited consumer choice and a marked desire for luxury goods. Seoul's technological development has proceeded at such a pace that issues such as privacy and the "digital divide" have received scant attention. The researchers point to these blind spots as forces that may even tend to destabilize democracy locally.

Odendaal asserts that South African urbanity, as exemplified by the city of Durban, requires its own theorizing apart from other "global cities." In an explicitly political project of attempting to encourage the uptake of ICTs by the poor of Durban, Odendaal recounts the relationship between technologies and "associational networks" in an African context. For example, women refused to participate in web site maintenance courses, because such activities were deemed to be the proper domain of the young and the male. Associational networks furthermore emerged as unstable and not tied to particular physical spaces in the same manner that may be true in the West.

Both the Seoul and the Durban experience would seem to bolster Dourish and Bell's (2007) claim that ICTs must take account of a network of social infrastructures if they are to be successful. The Seoul experience further lends credence to Crang and Graham's assertion that even their very success can lead ubiquitous computing systems to non-emancipatory outcomes.

In "Augmenting Public Space and Authoring Public Art: The Role of Locative Media" (2008), Townsend ties physical public art—in this case Olafur Eliasson's *Waterfalls* public art project in New York City—to a welter of grass roots locative media activity that emerged from it. Tourists and residents uploaded images to the web, YouTubed it, blogged it, and mapped it. *Waterfalls* suggests that public art and the digital

media supplements to it are likely to become ever more intertwined, indeed even to the point where the work and the use of digital media surrounding it are not clearly separable. Townsend further predicts a point at which centrally organized public art works will become unnecessary as a catalyst for citizens to undertake their own digitally authored public art activities.

Although Townsend's prediction has the ring of dire consequences for artists, it is already true that communities do not *need* centralized public art in order to create their own public forms of artistic expression by way of blogs, maps, photographs and video. Similarly the public does not *need* Niagara Falls or the Eiffel Tower to carry on robust authoring activities in virtual or real space even though both landmarks undoubtedly are pressed into service to that end. None of this says anything interesting about the evolving public engagement with these fixtures, which will continue to exist for reasons unrelated to their status as catalysts of digital media production. A more evocative set of questions might surround how public artists will anticipate and leverage the responsive digital media environments into which they will increasingly be thrust, and what opportunities do widely available locative media technologies open up for dialog with artists or dialog sparked by artists.

Urban Informatics Implementations—Descriptions and Analysis

I turn now to research highlighting specific implementations of ICT systems. By sampling a number of projects executed in this field, I hope to provide a robust context for the analysis of the three Atlanta-based projects to follow in Chapters 6 through 8 and to establish a critical vocabulary of forms and aesthetics relevant to artistic ICTs. In this

section, I will review ICTs two broad categories: those that envision technologically enabled utopian communities and those that engage urban spaces as concrete places.

Technological Utopias

Several projects invoke an implicitly utopian ideal of community as friction-free proximity. The ICTs are viewed mainly as agents of social engineering; the community an alienated crowd awaiting the unifying effect of technology.

Morgan and Polson's "The *FIGMENTUM* Project: Appropriating Information and Communication Technologies to Animate Our Urban Fabric" (in Foth, 2009) chronicles the development and implementation of a place-based ICT developed for the Kelvin Grove Urban Village (KGUV) in inner Brisbane, Australia. The researchers designed *FIGMENTUM* as a "generative art system" consisting of a wall-mounted digital display of animated, geometrical shapes of various colors that visualized data from the *FIGMENTUM* web site. Users answered questions at the web site about their mood, hunger level, energy level, frequency of visits to the site and feelings toward the site. Based on user responses, colors, animation frame rates, transparency and movements changed within the art work updating every two minutes.

FIGMENTUM's designers conceived the art work as a platform for new social relationships within the KGUV community. Through co-authorship of the work, *FIGMENTUM* offered "shared experiences, shared ownership and shared knowledge, three factors that are essential to the creation of . . . shared community imaginings," which the researchers elsewhere call "imagined community" after Benedict Anderson.

Writing about why such a system was developed, Morgan and Polson, who do consider themselves a part of the KGUV community, state:

Generative art systems allow us to trigger emotional and representational community imaginings through a visual display that can be encoded with information contributed by community members. They [i.e., the art systems⁶] are governed by rule sets that determine how information is encoded in the visual display and as such can be programmed to foster specific aspects of community solidarity.

Setting aside the highly dubious assertion that an uninterpretable series of colored circles and octagons have the power to do anything at all for community solidarity, the vision of a digital media art work imagined to be able to “trigger” certain community behaviors through the manipulation of code behind an opaque curtain remains nevertheless chilling. Even more disturbing, the exact mechanisms for this manipulated behavior seem to be entirely under the authority of unspecified technocrats who possess the keys to the code, even as those mechanisms are described as rather fine-grained in their ability to generate specific social outcomes. Although there is no evidence that such social effects actually arose as a result of *FIGMENTUM*, the fact remains that such was the fantasy animating the design of the system.

⁶ It is my interpretation that “they” here refers to the generative art systems, although it is telling that “they” might also refer to “community members” with shockingly little change in the authors’ meaning.

Furthermore, *FIGMENTUM* lacks a rigorous design philosophy that disciplines the form and content of the community's interaction with the system. For example, the researchers propose that a community member might reflect on the system to compare their hunger level to that of the rest of the community. Yet there is no indication of why hunger level is an interesting or relevant thing to be interrogating the community about, or why knowing how hungry one's neighbors are would lead to any heightened sense of community solidarity. Content seems to be almost arbitrary here, an afterthought to the sophisticated and spectacular technological algorithms.

The researchers declare *FIGMENTUM* a success in helping the community to create a meaningful and shared externalized self-image. However, no direct evidence to support this assertion is offered. The system did register 444 interactions over the course of a one-week deployment. Unfortunately, that figure conveys nothing about the quality, content or outcome of those interactions, merely the fact that they occurred.

Despite *FIGMENTUM*'s problematic design strategies, the researchers did find what Dourish and Bell would have predicted—that the success of the ICT artifact depended on the extent to which it could be woven into the fabric of pre-existing social, technical, and cultural meanings that inhered to the space it inhabited.

Sharing a similar utopian orientation to the potential of ICTs to create community, three interrelated initiatives described in Klaebe, Adkins, Foth, and Hearn's "Embedding an Ecology Notion in the Social Production of Urban Space" (in Foth, 2009) were designed once again for the KGUV community: *Sharing Stories*, *History Lines*, and *City*

Flocks. All three projects were designed to encourage higher levels of social interaction that would “link” the residents in this Queensland urban renewal project.⁷ Because KGUV was a new housing development, master planners sought ways to use new technologies to create “social sustainability.”

Sharing Stories was conceived as a kind of vernacular oral history project that would capture the personal stories of residents in their everyday lives. The stories took the form of 2- to 3-minute autobiographical mini-documentaries that included a narrated voice track, music and images. These stories were produced in intensive workshops focusing on creating a broadcast-quality product, and then screened in a variety of public events.

History Lines used online maps as an interface allowing residents to pinpoint where they have lived throughout their lives and the exact route by which they came to live at KGUV. They are also encouraged to record personal stories describing their relationships with previous communities. All of the stories and maps are collated to create a mass record displaying the many cities in which people have lived. This information can then be used to stimulate social networking or as qualitative data to be used in the urban planning process.

City Flocks makes no claims to the status of art, but rather is a mobile information service that allows users to deposit and retrieve recommendations about goods and services in their city. Users tag various community facilities with folksonomic tags. Recommendations are associated with individual recommenders in a network of

⁷ The term “urban renewal” in Australia largely lacks the troubled social and racial connotations that generally accompany the term in North America.

participants so that users can identify others with similar tastes and interests, whether local or global. Participants can choose to meet those with similar interests in real space if both parties agree.

All three of the KGUV initiatives share an imagining of the city as a backdrop of a priori alienation requiring a technological intervention to turn strangers into friends. With their emphasis on global connectivity and unproblematic mobility, *History Lines* and *City Flocks* also tend to turn KGUV into just another node in a generic global network. Rather than interrogate KGUV's particularity, the designers assume its identity with every other world city. Only its geographic coordinates differentiate it from others. By ignoring the social, historical and political infrastructures that bind KGUV's particular population in a particular place at a particular time, the designers risk enforcing through technology a thin set of generic urban experiences such as shopping, travel, and hanging out as constitutive of urban community participation with no particular valence to any one community or place over any other. The local citizen becomes the global flâneur.

Engaging Places

A handful of ICTs critically engage both the space they occupy and the people within that space in ways that go beyond simple notions of community as frictionless cohabitation. They use their structures to create platforms for negotiating difference rather than always attempting to increase sameness.

Ananny and Strohecker offer a vision of public interaction much more embedded in what Williams et al. call the "positionality" of particular urban experiences. Based on

the theory that public opinion emerges from a web of discursive exchanges between people and specific purpose-built forums within the urban environment, the designers created *TexTales* as a method for exploring the use of large-scale projection and participatory design techniques to create a forum for developing public opinion on issues of local concern.



3.3 *TexTales* screen capture.

TexTales was installed on four separate occasions each time with a different name, usually referencing the subject matter being treated in that particular location. Collaborating with local residents and artists, the *TexTales* team worked to identify an issue of concern, take photos illustrating the issue, and edit the photos down to a fixed number of groups. These groups of photos were then projected in a series of 3 x 3 grids in a high-traffic, public space. Via SMS technology, passersby sent anonymous text

messages that appeared instantly on the projection as captions commenting on a photo of their choice. The four issues addressed were the impending demolition of a government subsidized apartment complex (Dublin), a proposed ban on smoking in pubs (Dublin), the problem of teenage smokers (Amsterdam), and the problem of community identity in a mixed Catholic and Protestant community (Kilkeel, Northern Ireland). Messages submitted varied from thoughtful, highly engaged commentary to personal jokes and well wishes to pornographic spam comments whose volume tested the limits of the technology. These and similar experiences led the designers to experiment with forms of editing and conversation management with partial success. The designers noted that the conversations that occurred through the installation were not limited to the installation, but instead spilled over from the projection into the public space surrounding it. Often this spill-over conversation was prompted when spectators asked around to ascertain who had provided a particularly insightful or controversial comment.

TexTales avoids many of the design weaknesses of *FIGMENTUM* and the other KGUV ICT projects. Rather than attempt to become a global brand with a standardized name, content, and visual imagery, *TexTales* takes on the local color of every community in which it operates. Rather than imagining the city as the backdrop for aimless flânerie, it situates the projections in direct juxtaposition to the spaces in which grounded political issues play out and invites citizens to explore social reality not by acts of voyeurism, but by way of conversation and engagement. The content is neither arbitrary nor externally dictated but arises out of social congress between the designers and the communities for whom they design. Finally, *TexTales* encloses a space of community as something deeper and more salient than immanent, frictionless togetherness (Bishop). Its community is the

site of the active confrontation of persons with stakes in the social world encountering other persons with stakes in the social world. It rejects the intimate acts of mutual self-disclosure, such as those prompted by *Sharing Stories*—which in fact decrease rather than increase the chances for public discourse (Sennett)—and instead embraces the messy life of democracy.

Two final projects are worth brief mentions. In “Voices From Beyond: Ephemeral Histories, Locative Media and the Volatile Interface,” Crow, Longford, Sawchuk, and Zeffiro describe the work of the Mobile Media Lab (MML), an interdisciplinary group of Canadian digital media researchers. The MML designed *Urban Archaeology: Sampling the Park* and *The Haunting* as artistic urban informatics systems that would allow users to gain nuanced experiences of familiar public spaces.



3.4 *The Haunting* web site screen capture.

Urban Archaeology is a portable digital media-based tour of a park that uses images, interviews, and other sounds assembled by the designers into a multi-layered audiovisual collage recounting over 150 years of the park's history. Users roam freely around the park receiving images and sounds coordinated to their location as read by a GPS unit. The designers wished to preserve the history of official contestation and social tensions that mark the history of the area. The collage format allowed multiple conflicting stories to occupy the same space rather than attempt to provide a single overarching narrative. *The Haunting* similarly attempts to provide a layered history of a park space, this time through a multi-player game format played *in situ* with wireless devices.

Through these two media artifacts, the MML sought to highlight rather than elide the historical, social, and cultural conflicts that characterize the area's history. This engagement allows them to create a specific artifact designed in response to a specific place, complete with the "infrastructures" (Dourish and Bell) that give it meaning. The designers also present an alternative paradigm of community engagement to that used by the *TexTales* designers. Rather than the democratizing impulse followed by the latter—an impulse that would claim to draw in the broader community in order to fashion an aesthetic experience which is then handed back to that same community by way of the organizational prowess of the researchers—the MML treats a limited number of specific members of the community as experts largely for the benefit of an equally limited but entirely separate cadre of hand-picked university students who, as of the publication of Crow et al.'s research, were the system's only audience. My aim here is not to judge one of these methods as superior to the other. To the contrary, I wish to assert that each

method enacts a thoughtful encounter between community and audience that is sensitively attuned to the positionality of each party in each context.

Criteria for Analyzing Artistic Urban Informatics Systems

In this thesis I will analyze three digital media public art works in Atlanta's urban space. Although it is possible to read these works from a number of perspectives, in the context of the current study it makes most sense to analyze them along axes that would yield the most salient lessons for urban informatics systems generally. For this reason, I analyze these artworks as specific kinds of urban informatics systems, not because they were designed with this discipline in mind but because urban informatics offers us powerful analytical frameworks, the lessons of which can then be applied to the related design practices within information sciences and ubiquitous computing.

The figure of the flâneur serves as a convenient lens through which to view these and related aspects of urban informatics systems. As an urban anti-hero whose position as design subject we would do well to question, the flâneur embodies many of the tendencies that lead us to favor design for generic global cities while rendering invisible political and social fissures that animate democracy broadly.

Some artistic urban informatics systems, such as *TexTales* and *Urban Archaeology* successfully avoid many aspects of flânerie. Their engagement in public spaces renders transparent rather than opaque the social arrangements that structure both the works' creators and the works' audiences. They do not treat mobility as an abstract quality offered up problematically by "the city," but instead create meaningful engagements with particular spaces and particular histories. Finally, they do not claim to

produce knowledge of social reality merely through acts of detached voyeurism, but instead through conversation in the public square in the case of *TexTales* or deep descriptions of history in the case of *Urban Archaeology*. Both of these public space interventions take their respective urban conditions seriously, and not as mere backdrops for the play of arbitrary technologies.

Based on the preceding survey, three elements emerge as legitimate criteria by which we might assess public art works: their fit within the range of social, historical, cultural, and other infrastructures into which they are potentially embedded (that is, the works' positionality), the animating fantasies that govern their design as social apparatuses, and the underlying assumptions about community that condition their specific forms of engagement with public space.

CHAPTER 4

THE FLÂNEUR IN THE CITY

It is not given to every man to take a bath of multitude; enjoying a crowd is an art; and only he can enjoy a debauch of vitality at the expense of the human species, on whom, in his cradle, a fairy has bestowed the love of masks and masquerading, the hate of home, and the passion of roaming.

—Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*

“Well, how do you see what all it is to see?”

Mr. Head didn’t answer. Then as if the sight of people passing had given him the clue, he said, “You walk,” and started off down the street.

—Flannery O’Connor, *“The Artificial Nigger”*

Strolling

As a distinct social “type” in nineteenth century Paris, the flâneur (from the French meaning “loiterer” or “stroller”) emerged not only from the post-Revolutionary social milieu of a city still reorganizing itself politically, but quite literally from the architectural hardware of the urban landscape, which underwent its own upheavals concomitant with those of the political disruptions that fed it (Vidler). The flâneur could be found most paradigmatically in Paris’s many glass-covered arcades, a form of “indoor-outdoor” space (Crickenberger) that hosted Paris’s newly empowered middle

class in its activities of shopping, seeing and being seen. But the mid-century version of the arcade replaced an older, less salubrious version of the architecture that had been exemplified by the Galeries de Bois.

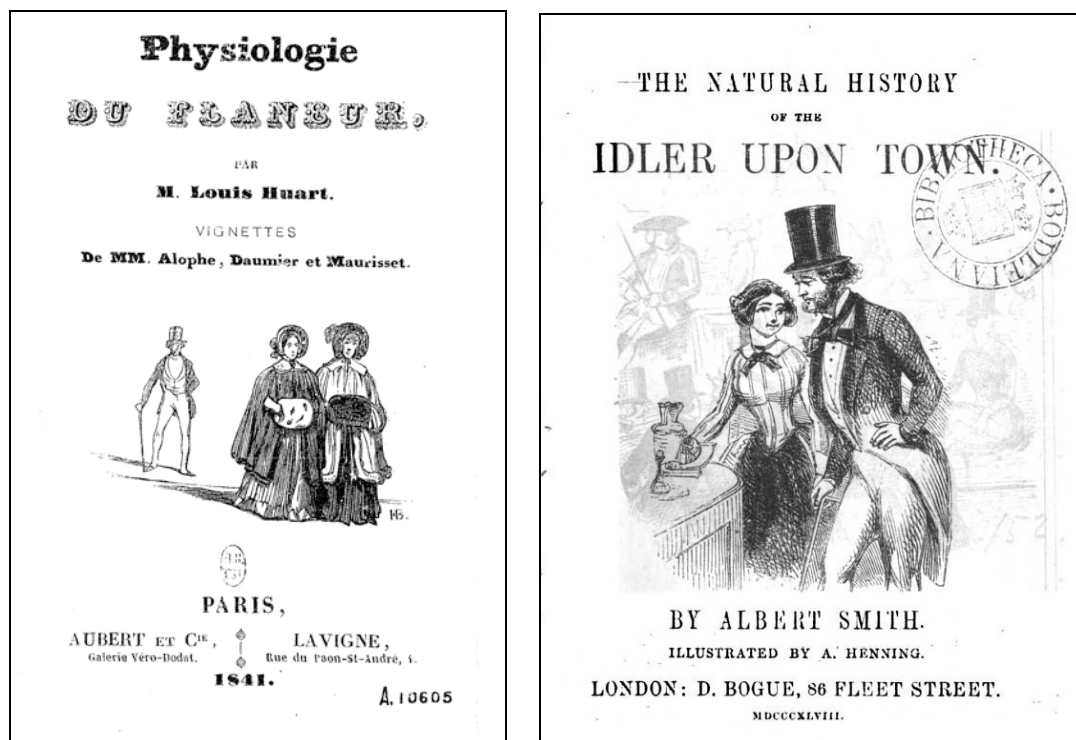
Surviving from the late 1780s as an accompanying gallery to the Palais Royale, the Galeries de Bois became both marketplace and populist social space after its takeover by the people of Paris in the aftermath of the Revolution. The Galeries hosted a range of Parisian classes from the merchant classes to prostitutes to criminal elements, and at the height of its popularity in the opening decades of the nineteenth century often became so crowded, its occupants could hardly move. The Galeries attained this popularity even as its most salient architectural features were its dankness and decrepitude. Balzac described the Galeries de Bois in *Illusions Perdues* as “They were shanties, or more exactly wood huts, poorly roofed, small, dimly lit on the court and garden side by lights of sufferance which passed for windows but which in fact were more like the dirtiest kind of aperture found in taverns beyond the city gates.” (Balzac, 260).

Shortly after the Restoration and ascension of Louis Philippe the Bourgeois king in 1830, the beloved Galeries de Bois, covered in excrement and graffiti, were demolished and replaced by the “cold, lofty, broad” (Balzac) Galerie d’Orléans. The replacement structure was a brightly lit, spacious and airy arcade of iron and glass that represented not only the technological triumph of the newest building materials (Benjamin 78), but also the continuing promise of social progressivism first held out by the storming of the Bastille decades earlier.

The iron and glass arcade had been theorized most fully by philosopher Charles Fourier who imagined the arcade as an instrument of social justice. Fourier’s ideal city

was a single continuous building of covered pedestrian walkways, protected from bad weather, and given to the perpetual circulation of the crowd in an endless dance of social congress.

The flâneur was one of several social types emerging in the first half of the nineteenth century to be described in detail in the so-called *physiologies* published during the period. Other types—the dandy, the bohemian, the street vendor—were similarly dissected literarily in these slim volumes, which served as guides to the newly developed street culture of Paris.



4.1 Cover illustrations from Parisian and London *physiologies* of the flâneur.

Unlike the prostitute or the market vendor of the Galeries de Bois, the flâneur was marked primarily by privileged idleness and a middle class social position. A man of leisure if not always wealth, he arose in the context of Paris's new architecture of

hypertrophied shop windows and the relentlessly multiplying displays of the products of industrialism. The flâneur was the consummate window shopper.

Charles Baudelaire, the nineteenth century poet most articulate and self-reflexive about the *physiologie* of the flâneur, was less than 10 years old upon the demolition of the Galeries de Bois. As he literally matured with the new building forms he likewise became a new sort of Parisian man: the lone wanderer among the crowd, the social observer absorbing the parade of city life as an accumulation of social detail whose significance he divined through ocular digestion in total silence. A quote from *Paris Spleen* reveals the flâneur's position in the social ecology.

The poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being able to be himself or someone else as he chooses. Like those wandering souls who go looking for a body, he enters as he likes into each man's personality. For him alone everything is vacant; and if certain places seem closed to him, it is only because in his eyes they are not worth visiting.

The solitary and thoughtful stroller finds a singular intoxication in this universal communion. The man who loves to lose himself in a crowd enjoys feverish delights that the egoist locked up in himself as in a box, and the slothful man like a mollusk in his shell, will be eternally deprived of. He adopts as his own all the occupations, all the joys and all the sorrows that chance offers. (20)

Baudelaire speaks of "entering" others, indeed "being" someone else. His involvement with others is intense but dematerialized, playing out in the theater of personalities

rendered as generic social categories. As such it necessarily must play out in the space of projection and voyeuristic imagination, not in the space of public discourse⁸.

The step from voyeuristic imagination to pure illusionist fantasy is a short one. And the flâneur traffics in both. After “wedding himself to the masses,” the flâneur painter Constantin Guys is described by Baudelaire as “an *I* insatiably eager for the *not-I*, continually interpreting and expressing the latter in images more lovely than life itself, images always changing and fugitive” [italics in original] (*Painter*, 33–34). The flâneur not only sees, but sublimates vision into exotic fantasy.



4.2 Passage des Panoramas, Paris 1910. Photographer unknown.

⁸ Much of this passage owes a debt to Richard Sennett's *Fall of Public Man*, which while not directly responsible for these arguments does set up many of the philosophical tent poles regarding the place of the individual in public life that will become explicit in Chapter 7.

Although the flâneur's roving and insatiable gaze may have found its purest expression in the shop windows of the arcade, Baudelaire painted a portrait of himself as all too willing to convert an entire city of experiences into the lingua franca of spectacle. Baudelaire the flâneur wandered the entire Parisian landscape—or at least all parts of it that interested him. He privileged the slow and intentional, yet unconstrained, walk through urban space. In the flâneur's own mind, all Paris belonged to him, all avenues were open to him, all its people open to his inspection.



4.3 Passage Jouffroy in Paris, March 2007. Photo by Clicsouris, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.5 Generic.

Baudelaire paid particularly close attention to the poor, the vulnerable, and the socially outcast. He was at times contemptuous as in one episode when he sees a glazier and reports, “It would be impossible for me to say why I was suddenly seized by an arbitrary loathing for this poor man.” (*Spleen* 12). But more often the sight of the poor evokes something between pity and ecstasy:

On the street directly in front of us, a worthy man of about forty, with tired face and greying beard, was standing holding a small boy by the hand and carrying on his arm another little thing, still too weak to walk. . . . They were in rags. The three faces were extraordinarily serious, and those six eyes stared fixedly at the new café with admiration, equal in degree but differing in kind according to their ages.

The eyes of the father said: “How beautiful it is! How beautiful it is! All the gold of the poor world must have found its way onto those walls.” The eyes of the little boy: “How beautiful it is! How beautiful it is! But it is a house where only people who are not like us can go.” As for the baby, he was much too fascinated to express anything but joy—utterly stupid and profound.

Song writers say that pleasure ennobles the soul and softens the heart. The song was right that evening as far as I was concerned. Not only was I touched by this family of eyes, but I was even a little ashamed of our glasses and decanters, too big for our thirst. (*Spleen* 52–53)

After the time of the construction of the Galerie d'Orléans, the poor were increasingly marginalized into their own quarters of the city. Increasingly, they had to be sought out rather than lived with, particularly within the confines of the bourgeois, sanitized arcades, which produced a simulacrum of the street rather than the messy diversity of the street itself. This process of segregation accelerated in mid-century with Haussmann's rationalization of the Paris street plan in the Second Empire.

Many of Paris's *physiologie* types were the response to the vitiation of real forms of social difference once present in the public experience of the urban dweller of Paris (Vidler). Real poverty gave way to bohemianism; real aristocracy became the ersatz posturing of the dandy⁹; real criminality found a new voice in the bratty mischief of the flâneur. Baudelaire becomes explicit about this craving for difference, even generalizing the trait to all "poets and philosophers" of whom he claims, "they feel themselves irresistibly drawn toward anything that is feeble, destitute, orphaned, and forlorn."

Baudelaire engages few of the destitute objects of his scrutiny in direct social exchange. Rather, the pleasure of seeing is paid for precisely by the imposition of mutual silences, neither speaking nor allowing himself to be spoken to. Being a flâneur requires the middle-class gentleman to enter a space of provisional willful ignorance. The rapid

⁹ While the dandy of nineteenth century London was unrepentantly aligned with the anti-egalitarian, pre-industrial values of the British aristocracy, the case was more muddled in France. French dandies were more likely to be aligned with other post-Revolution, middle-class types such as the bohemians. Indeed Parisian dandyism might be seen as a specialized form of Parisian bohemianism. France's true native equivalents to the British dandy were the male *incroyable* and the female *merveilleuse* of a generation earlier, types who so reacted against the Revolution that they often called themselves "incoyables" and "meveilleuses," dropping the R's, which they associated with Revolution. What all these types had in common was their middle-class standing and an exaggerated mimicry of aristocratic manners made possible or even necessary by their segregation from the class they mimicked.

and undisturbed manufacture of fantasies, abetted by silence, becomes the mechanism for parsing the otherwise overwhelming crowd.

The reigning silence of public behavior in nineteenth century Paris was a general condition (Sennett 206–208) not a trait specific to the flâneur. However it was the flâneur perhaps uniquely who sought to convert this silence into an epistemological system. For him, silence was not a social deficiency for which alternative methods of knowledge had to be exercised as compensatory, it was a tool through which a fully flowered erotics of knowledge could be realized. This was the voyeuristic knowledge of the innermost passion of a widow glimpsed for a moment on the street in “A une passante” in *Les Fleurs du mal*—a woman seen briefly yet “known” intimately.

Baudelaire constructs through observation not only a psychological reality for those he encounters, but a social reality, realities which over the course of the nineteenth century were becoming less and less separable (Sennett). While mingling among a crowd at a circus, for example, Baudelaire encounters an old clown seemingly ignored by the crowd. He does not speak to the man, but invents a story of the man’s solitude, his family status and his entire relationship to Paris society (Spleen 27). Although he considers for a moment leaving some money for the man, he succeeds only in feeling despair tinged with some degree of self-pity. Here as elsewhere his personal reaction of grief substitutes for social engagement.

A secondary aspect of the flâneur was the flâneur as himself a spectacle, an object of display. As was true for the prostitutes of the Galeries de bois who were his social predecessor, his slow movement through space meant that he was both observer and observed, watcher and watched (Vidler). Although a strand of theoretical literature

incorporates this attribute into analyses of the type, I believe that many of these characterizations veer toward describing the dandy in nearly conflated terms. While these types were related socially, they maintained distinct social profiles. To avoid confusion I use *flâneur* in its narrower definition as the all-roving eye, the endless subject.

The *flâneur* was a new type in the nineteenth century, a new social technology, self-invented to express the context in which he found himself. Contexts and social arrangements shift, however, and with the temporal displacement of a century and a half, the figure of the *flâneur* becomes problematic. In the context of a participatory democracy, the habit of mind that we can understand the world merely through passive looking might have significant consequences. If we are to take our cities and our democracies seriously then our technologies must not construe urban space merely as a backdrop for disengaged spectacle, but must promote situated engagement as a good in itself.

The Flâneuse

I have so far considered the *flâneur* as a specifically male figure. Baudelaire as the prototypical *flâneur* experienced a freedom of mobility that for women was largely available only to prostitutes and widows (Buck-Morss 119, Sennett 217). Yet if we consider the female *flâneuse*, some of the problematic social and historical connotations of *flânerie* become a bit more nuanced.

Friedberg has linked the rise of the department store in late nineteenth-century Paris to the appearance of the *flâneuse* (a gendered word of modern coinage). The department store allowed the bourgeois female to move about unaccompanied and to take

her discerning gaze with her. (36) The wholly interior-oriented architecture of the department store may have tamed and regulated everything that had been alluring about the crowd for the flâneur, but its interiority also provided the protection from the street needed for the flâneuse to become a viable social fact.

Here flânerie becomes the vehicle of a certain degree of social empowerment. Through her purchasing power in the rapidly rising tempo of capitalism, the department store flâneuse became a main target of address by the industrial system of manufacture and distribution of goods. Whether this sort of market attention and circumscribed mobility represents real power is not uncontested. Anke Gleber objects to the characterization of this social turn as evidence of empowerment. “Limited excursions of shopping in a prescribed ghetto of consumption amount to little more than secondhand distraction, never approximating the flâneur’s wide-reaching mode of perception, unimpeded by aims, purposes, and schedules.”(71)

To be sure, to speak of the flâneuse’s “power” must be understood within the confining context of an industrial capitalist system whose experiments in the reorganization of social relations were only beginning to get underway. However, the absence of some *greater* form of power should not blind us to the existence of another albeit lesser form, which was already greater than what had preceded it. Gleber herself acknowledges the critical difference later in the same essay when she traces the transition from “doing the shopping” to “going” shopping. This is the transition from shopping as routine errand to shopping as leisure exercise. In the flâneuse, the West witnesses the first instance of a woman’s gaze holding categorical social power in the modern era.

The political connotations of flânerie are contextual. Although previously, I have traced ways in which flânerie is problematic, we might equally imagine social arrangements or contexts that might render aspects of flânerie empowering or liberating. Its political ramifications depend wholly on the network of social meanings in which the practice is embedded.

The Latter-Day Flâneur

The flâneur that Baudelaire would have recognized had vanished by 1867, coincidentally the year of Baudelaire's death. The Haussmannization of Paris in the preceding decade and a half had successfully "transformed the Paris of Balzac into the Paris of Zola" (Vidler 99). With its new, wide boulevards and grand, semi-public palaces of art and industry, Paris no longer played host to the face in the crowd, but to the crowd as undifferentiated mass. As the *Paris Guide* of that year lamented, "Everything has been leveled out; everything has been erased, the types have disappeared." (931)

The new Paris of Haussmann was not only hostile to the old flâneur and the bohemian, it was suddenly an international city, a cosmopolitan city as never before. The *Paris Guide* goes on to describe the detested boulevard as the locus of:

des Anglaises longues et anguleuses, des Havanais jaunes, des Espagnols basanés, des Italiennes au teint mat, des Valaques rose-thé, des Allemandes sentimentales mais dodues, des Russes élégantes mais déhanchées. [. . .]

Voici des ténors italiens, des Othellos nègres, des écuyères due désert, des méthodistes et des boyards, des Égyptiens en rupture de harem [. . .] C'est

*l'Égypte, c'est la Havane, c'est Madrid, c'est Pétersbourg, c'est Bombay [. . .]
c'est le Monde!*

*Le Parisien, lui, se fait humble, il rase les murs, il abdique; hospitalier
jusqu'au dévouement, il laisse croire aux cinq parties du globe que le boulevard
est à elles, et que Paris sert de Porcherons au monde en goguette. (931)¹⁰*

Meanwhile, the department store relied on innovations such as fixed, published prices and the accumulation of goods in variety (Sennett 144) to turn *flânerie* into a standard form of market encounter. No longer was *flânerie* the exclusive terrain of a few middle-class, male spectator specialists. *Flânerie* had become the paradigmatic interaction with industrial capitalism for the bourgeois classes. The political nature of the street disappeared (Vidler 77) and disengaged, silent watchfulness became the normal, middle-class mode of public comportment. (Sennett 206).

Much of middle-class public behavior in US cities derives from this form of public presence. *Flânerie* is, we might say, locked into the DNA of our social norms. We need not, however, conflate the existence of a few “*flâneur*” genes as it were with the idea of *being a flâneur*. This distinction becomes critical in attempting to determine whether and to what extent the design of an ICT is “enabling *flânerie*.” The relevant question is not whether the artifact in question coincidentally and superficially

¹⁰ Tall, bony English ladies, yellow Havanans, sun-tanned Spaniards, dull skinned Italian ladies, tea-rose Romanians, sentimental but chubby German ladies, Russian ladies, elegant, but swaying. [. . .] Here you see Italian tenors, Negro Othellos, horsewomen of the desert, Methodists and East European aristocrats, harem-free Egyptians [. . .] It's Egypt, it's Havana, it's Madrid, it's Petersburg, it's Bombay [. . .] it's the World! Meanwhile the Parisian lowers himself, knocks down the walls, he gives up; hospitable to the point of devotion, he lets the four corners of the earth believe the boulevard is theirs and that Paris is a fairground for the world at play.

reproduces some of the activities of a flâneur, aimless walking for example, but whether it is beholden to a particular epistemological system embedded in outmoded political and social positionalities.

I believe this approach is rigorously grounded in historical evidence while remaining humane. We can argue against flânerie without denying the pleasures of discretionary mobility. We can mount a critique of the flâneur as a figure yet not deny the opportunity for new modalities of social empowerment that might not have been available previously.

To be precise then about the “latter-day flâneur,” she is the unencumbered subject that exists in the urban crowd, but whose interactions with it are low-obligation and of little meaning in terms of public discourse. She experiences spaces as interchangeable and generic, as simply the backdrop for the play of spectacles and technologies. She will be encouraged to conclude that she has attained an understanding of social reality based either on little actual social evidence or purely on spectacular imagination. She is encouraged to think of mobility as seamless, frictionless and above all as a matter of leisure. Any place that she does not go will be seen as being unworthy of going to.

Flânerie is what is left over when positionality is ignored and the particular urban becomes merely the global city.

CHAPTER 5

ATLANTA AND THE CONTEST OF SPACE

Strange, but there are a lot of these black areas. You don't hear about them.

—J.G. Ballard, “Concentration City”

Just promise to send me a postcard when you get there. What the hell do they have postcards of in Atlanta?

—Tom Wolfe, *A Man in Full*

The Importance of Second-Tier Cities

Chapter 4 sketched out the history of the flâneur's experience of urbanism and suggested that design that doesn't take positionalities into account, but instead understands the city only as a global abstraction will at best fail to consider the full range of urban experiences available to us. At worst it will reify outmoded social arrangements that tend to erode meaningful participation in the public domain. The solution offered is to design for particular experiences in particular urban contexts.

This chapter will give an account of public space in Atlanta inspired by Geertz's notion of the “thick description.” It will establish a broad context for a grounded critique of the digital media projects in Chapters 6 through 8 to better understand which affordances of the city they exploit and which they neglect. This description will draw

from historical and anthropological literature and will sketch the broad themes of public space contestation and the fractious history of mobility in Atlanta.

Studying Atlanta serves another purpose. Much of the research in ubiquitous and urban computing has been focused around a few so-called global cities, such as New York, Tokyo, and Los Angeles (see for example Mainwaring, Anderson, and Chang, 2005), an ecology of places and spaces whose morphologies and functional particulars are widely known. Cities that cannot be classified as the “charismatic megalopoles” of urban spaces (Bell and Dourish in Paulos et al. 14) are left poorly understood since almost by definition they refuse use patterns and cultural patterns common to global cities. Designers of urban ICTs must eventually confront the vast array of urban experiences in the world since most urban-dwelling humans on the planet live somewhere that is *not* New York, Los Angeles, or Tokyo. I hope to add to the literature of cities with the specific case study of Atlanta as a unique urban environment.

Atlanta occupies a contradictory position in the ecology of cities. From its founding as Terminus in 1837, it has always been a regional transportation hub, first by railway and later by automobile and finally air travel. Today, Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport is the world’s busiest airport with approximately 90 million passengers passing through annually.¹¹ It played host to the Olympics in 1996 and is an extremely popular city for conventions and professional meetings.

At the same time, Atlanta lies at the heart of that region H.L. Mencken called the “Sahara of the Bozart” in 1917. Its ongoing history of nearly hysterical municipal

¹¹ *Wikipedia*, “Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport,” accessed 20 February 2010.

boosterism and official hucksterism regularly overshadows any actual cultural or technological achievements on the international stage (Rutheiser). Its urban morphology is unique among American cities, its rate of sprawl literally unparalleled in human history and its residential patterns unlike those of any of its peer cities in the US. Closely examining Atlanta as a city that often escapes the notice of researchers, will provide clues as to how a different set of urban concerns might affect the deployment of ICTs in public space.

Race Effects

Atlanta's current morphology can be seen as having arisen from a set of negotiations between three forces asymmetrically positioned in relationship to one to another: the city's black population, the city's white population, and the automobile. An ongoing dynamic tension between the three has certainly colored nearly every important decision in city development, and arguably a large number of minor decisions.

As in most southern US cities, black and white populations lived after the Civil War with little in the way of legally enforced spatial segregation in matters such as housing and mobility. (Litwack 229) The earliest Jim Crow laws backed disjunctive political and civil justice practices with the force of law, but rarely had much to say about movement and residency patterns, which were largely governed by the strong social codes surviving from generations of slavery. As the black population grew, however, so too did the urgency to tightly control black mobility and the spread of the black population. (Bayor 54)

The Atlanta city council passed its first racial residential segregation¹² ordinances in 1913, delineating blocks by race. After the US Supreme Court struck down the ordinances as unconstitutional, residential racial policy went underground and found a home in the zoning regulations enacted by the city over the next several decades. The regulations, in which land use included racial provisions, had two major effects: (1) vast tracts of land became single-race territories, not through natural migration patterns but through the force of code and (2) industrial, commercial and undeveloped land parcels were routinely used to segregate neighborhoods by race (Bayor 55), creating an aggressively atomized neighborhood structure that tended to block one neighborhood off from another.

Segregation laws, however, were historically less about separating the races absolutely than they were about regulating the contact between races in predictable ways that held benefits for the groups in power. For example, in the era of motorized travel, blacks and whites rode the same buses, but positioning within buses was circumscribed by legal codes that were not only spatial but temporal, with different allowances at different times of day. Throughout the Jim Crow era, blacks and whites continued to be economically intertwined, bringing them into frequent and close contact. The fear particularly on the part of whites, but also some blacks, was not of contact in the abstract,

¹² Throughout this chapter I use terms such as “segregation” and “desegregation” as shorthand methods of describing an complex system of political strategies and social desires. In particular, I am aware of the existence of a wide variety of social remedies sought by blacks for justice during Jim Crow, not all of which involved desegregation. In “Urban Revolutions and the Spaces of Black Nationalism,” Tyner eloquently gives voice to the ways in which black radical struggles beginning in the 1940s were necessarily spatial battles as many blacks sought not integration, but autonomous spaces of power from which to enact social self-determination. What these movements have in common with desegregationist movements, however, is a will to unencumbered mobility, a desire to go where one pleases, not to where one is compelled.

but of *unregulated* contact whose terms were not explicitly dictated by the state, that is a fear of “interracial intimacy,” (Kruse 106).

The mental habit of segregation played out in a variety of infrastructures at the citywide level such as the establishment of bus routes (Kruse 111). Service tended to reinforce separation and isolation rather than serve to stitch together the urban fabric.

When all other strategies of racial separation failed, much of white Atlanta simply chose to leave¹³ for Atlanta’s ever expanding sylvan suburbs beginning en masse in the 1950s (Kruse, 107). This mass out-migration had the effect of radically depopulating the central city, while simultaneously leaving it largely to the minority populations that were trapped either by their own financial circumstances or by the legal codes preventing their movement out.

Strategies of racial containment continued explicitly throughout the 1950s and 1960s and implicitly thereafter. Strategies unleashed on the population included highway building, strategic road paving, underdevelopment of land, street cutting and rerouting, street name changes, and parks and other public spaces built as barriers.

Few of these strategies of containment worked in the long term as black populations under pressure of overpopulation in restricted areas consistently found ways around the intended roadblocks and breakwaters. (Rutheiser 60, 69) Indeed, a significant part of the story of mobility in Atlanta is precisely the extent to which by the 1980s,

¹³ The case of mass migrations is certainly more complex than simple racial panic on a city-wide scale. A system of carrots and sticks both pushed whites out of the city and lured them into the suburbs, not all of them racially based. Garreau traces the influences of class and other nonracial factors in the development of “edge cities” in his book of the same name. However, I wish to emphasize here the components that connected to other social trends that served to reconfigure space in Atlanta over time.

many of these roadblocks while morphologically relevant had become racially irrelevant, or at least less relevant (Garreau). Once these populations gained mobility, however, many of the roadblocks and breakwaters themselves remained intact. Substantial portions of Atlanta's urban structure derive from the unsuccessful effort to regulate interracial contact and class mingling.

The urban form influenced by Atlanta's racially fraught legal and social practices are felt in the city to the present day in the form of the many unenforced yet palpable boundaries of division that cleave the city. In his sweeping and devastating historical critique of Atlanta, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams*, Charles Rutheiser writes:

The drawing of limits and boundaries is central to understanding the political, economic, and sociocultural processes that restlessly reconfigure Atlanta's landscape. Although boosters speak of Atlanta as an undifferentiated whole, the benefits of growth have been most unevenly distributed across the metropolitan region. (74)

Significantly, the 1913 residential ordinances were not only the first racial zoning laws, they were Atlanta's first experience with comprehensive city planning of any kind, as was the case in many southern cities. (Rutheiser 144) In the south the birth of city planning is inextricably bound up with a racist history of the confinement, control, and displacement of its black populations. The explicitly racial zoning plans of earlier eras would frequently sneak into the plans of later eras without the racial language, but with

many of the same structural and functional features intact. According to Leon Eplan, Atlanta's commissioner of budget and planning in the late 70s and early 80s¹⁴, "There are virtually no major decisions in Atlanta that don't have a racial factor built into it. Everything has a racial component." (Bayor, 83)

Atlanta's urban development process can be seen in many ways as the reverse of haussmannization. Under Haussmann's Second Empire plan, Paris was swept into the embracing vision of a unified whole for first time in the modern era rather than particalized as a collection of accumulated districts. The effect of Haussmann's rationalization program was to break apart the old political alliances that were sheltered by the closed and tortuous streets comfortable to the *ancien régime*, and thereby render a population of political radicals and other Parisian types invisible to itself (*Paris Guide*). Atlanta on the other hand was made to function as an agglutination of separate and largely uncommunicating cells, each consecrated to a single very narrow demographic slice of the population (Rutheiser 75). Where Paris was made rational and cosmopolitan, Atlanta in the century that followed was made intentionally irrational and anti-cosmopolitan. By clumping like with like, populations became hypervisible to themselves and to any outsiders who might accidentally wander in.

In Flannery O'Connor's "The Artificial Nigger," Mr. Head takes a day trip with his grandson Nelson from the country to Atlanta, the city of the child's birth. He hopes to shock the boy with an experience of the city's decadence and racial otherness so as to

¹⁴ During this, the Maynard Jackson, mayoral administration, Atlanta attained its current motto: "The City Too Busy to Hate," an odd sentiment implying that hatred is merely a scheduling problem rather than a moral wrong.

ensure that the boy will never want to go back. Soon, even the grandfather loses his way in the confusing street grid and is thrown face to face with the atomizing effect of a city designed for division:

They walked on for some time on streets like this before he remembered to turn again. The houses they were passing now were all unpainted and the wood in them looked rotten; the street between was narrower. Nelson saw a colored man. Then another. Then another. “Niggers live in these houses,” he observed.

“Well come on and we’ll go somewhere’s else,” Mr. Head said. “We didn’t come to look at niggers,” and they turned down another street but they continued to see Negroes everywhere. Nelson’s skin began to prickle and they stepped along at a faster pace in order to leave the neighborhood as soon as possible. [...] “Yes,” Mr. Head said, “this is where you were born right here with all these niggers.”

Nelson scowled, “I think you done got us lost,” he said.

Atlanta’s traffic patterns and automobile use are a direct outgrowth of its difficulties with race (Kruse 115). After the 1957 court ordered desegregation of public transportation, many whites resorted to private cars rather than confront the unregulated space of racial intimacy that desegregation promised. Within a year, fares were down 13 percent and by 1960, Atlanta’s white working class chose cars over public transportation 2-to-1. The trend that was to gain steam over the decades as the system itself lost political

support and, therefore, effectiveness, and a relatively greater emphasis was placed on outfitting the city to accommodate private transportation.

The physical structure of roads and streets also played out dominant social tensions. The 1944 Lochner Report, a traffic plan commissioned by a bevy of local, state, and federal agencies, suggested that whenever a road or highway could serve a function of racial displacement or containment in addition to providing traffic flow it should be designed to do so. (Bayer 61) Today, the city continues to suffer the adverse effects of a road system designed as much to stop movement as to facilitate it (Bayer 85). Even a cursory drive around the Atlanta metro area reveals such a tangle of errant streets, confusing highways, trick turns, baffling name changes, dead ends, and gulch-like underpasses that one is surprised ever to be able to arrive anywhere at all. Most notably, the city has relatively few significant thoroughfares that allow an undiverted, long-range, north–south trajectory, a trajectory which broadly speaking would connect the areas that had once been traditionally white with those that had been traditionally black. (Rutheiser 65, 68). Nearly all such thoroughfares have been systematically abrogated or redirected.

Even without the racial component, Atlanta has long enjoyed a fervent love affair with the automobile, outstripping its use in similarly positioned cities whose populations opted instead for denser, more walkable cities and larger investments in public transportation. In this way, Atlanta was “born suburbanized” (141) and experienced no fall from urban grace. It never enjoyed much of the dense, traditional urbanism found in many large North American cities.

Walking in Atlanta

Walking is the hallmark of the flâneur, but driving is the social experience most likely to be shared by a large cross-section of Atlantans. Because of the emphasis on driving, pedestrians in Atlanta are rarely romanticized as flâneurs nor lionized as ecologically responsible citizens. Instead the city infrastructure itself often relegates them to a kind of second class status. (Rutheiser 111)

This effect is often portrayed in literature as the strange socially isolating effect that pedestrianism entails in Atlanta. The Heads in the O'Connor story, for example, find themselves utterly alone and lost on the streets once outside the central downtown area. They are simultaneously relieved by having escaped the unrelenting blackness of the city and nearly panic-stricken by their solitude and the disorientation that stems from it.

Tom Wolfe's *A Man in Full* includes this description of Peepgass, an insecure middle-class striver, and his slow drive up a wealthy Buckhead street:

—there in the middle of the street . . . *women!* . . . six or eight of them . . . walking right in the middle of the road . . . at a leisurely pace . . . laughing, talking . . . black and Latin women of various ages, but none very young, some in dresses, some in blouses and pants and sneakers, walking right in the middle of Valley Road . . . In the next instant it dawned on Peepgass . . . *Maids*, housemaids, for the castles! [...] There were no sidewalks in this part of Buckhead—who other than servants would be walking anywhere anyway—and they had to walk in the street. (502)

Later in the same novel, Conrad, a character who has escaped from a California prison in the confusion of a fortuitous earthquake, finds himself walking along a Gwinnett County street. Being white and conservatively dressed, he imagines he will not attract undue attention. However, the fact that he is walking—and the only person to be doing so anywhere within sight—is enough to arouse the suspicion of police who stop ostensibly to help him, but in fact to give him the once-over. (625)

Walking has been elevated by the urban design practice of new urbanism and related practices not only as a pleasurable inherent good¹⁵, but also as emblematic of both the urban and the urbane. In the Atlanta imagination, however, walking is not a class marker of sophistication, but one of second class citizenship. Walking in the great majority of the Atlanta metro area is largely something one does if one is black, poor, Mexican, a criminal, a maid, or from the country.

Atlanta and the Nature of Public Space

Traditional forms of urban public space such as plazas, boulevards, esplanades and parks have been disproportionately rare in Atlanta for a city of its geographical extents. Public spaces that do get built tend to be compromised by falling under the sway of private interests. Woodruff Park, for example, a six-acre downtown park located at the central area known as Five Points began to emerge in the 1990s as an authentically diverse urban space. It was routinely used by office workers, students, and a sizeable homeless population all of whom maintained an uneasy mutual truce in the space. Leading up to

¹⁵ <http://www.newurbanism.org/newurbanism/principles.html>

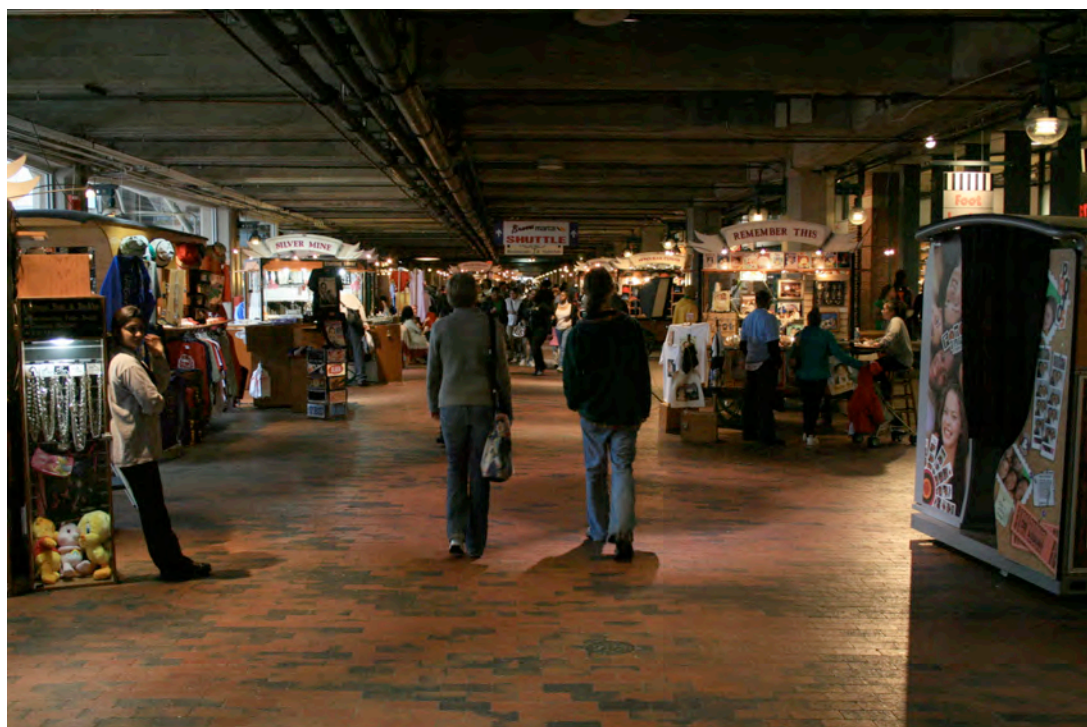
the Olympic games of 1996, downtown organizers planned a pedestrian link from the park to Underground Atlanta. But as the plans became increasingly underwritten by private financing, pressure grew to sanitize the park through redesign so that it might be less amenable to the homeless populations, a request which was in fact heeded. The Woodruff Park incident revealed a tendency toward a “theme parking and privatization of Atlanta’s public domain.” (Rutheiser 215) Again, Rutheiser sees this as part of a larger trend:

[T]he new arena, Underground Atlanta, Fairlie-Poplar, and Woodruff Park are no more than an unconnected assemblage of flashy stage sets intended to bedazzle and bamboozle the multitudes into believing that some sort of “traditional urbanity” has been rediscovered downtown. All four are demonstration projects of the new kind of urban space that uses “sumptuous architectural imagery, fictional information, entertainment, and spectacle” to blur the boundaries between public and private space and interest until these polar opposites merge into one delirious celebration of the commodity form. (Rutheiser quoting M. Christine Boyer, “The City of Illusion,” 220)

If true public space in Atlanta is rare it is all the more contested, most often among the predictable constituencies defined by race and class. In 1960, before the desegregation of most public facilities, blacks were permitted in just 8 of 50 public parks and in 8 out of 127 tennis courts (Keating 99). Meanwhile in the same year, three years after bus desegregation, blacks accounted for 59% of bus ridership while making up only a third of the urban population (Kruse 117).



5.1 Woodruff Park, Atlanta. Photo by Scott Ehardt released to public domain.



5.2 Underground Atlanta. Photo by Ildar Sagdejev, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported.

Star points to the importance of studying infrastructure when examining the workings of a city (379). To take this challenge seriously in the context of Atlanta means to confront the infrastructures of separation, displacement and sprawl that have resulted in disjointed forms of mobility for the entire city. Because new infrastructure is typically built to the standards of pre-existing infrastructure (Star 381), we should not be surprised to find that zoning regulations established in the 1920s greased the wheels for continued racial segregationist zoning policies into the 1960s. (Bayor 82–84) Similarly, Atlantans' patterns of public transportation use, their reliance on the automobile, and their general denigration of walking continue to have (often divisive) social effects even as the structures for it were put in place a century ago. As we build ubiquitous computing frameworks in Atlanta and elsewhere it is vital to consider the lopsided forms of mobility and discontinuous, possibly even racist and/or class-bound infrastructures that we might be inheriting as our starting points.



5.3 Map of Atlanta as provided by news.com.au.

Wolfe provides a poignant demonstration of the social effects of infrastructure, this time in the form of representations, when the fictional mayor of Atlanta Wes Jordan reminds his protégé Roger about Atlanta's divisions and how they map spatially:

Did you happen to see any of those “guides to Atlanta” they published for the Olympics? Big, thick things, some of them, regular books, and I couldn't believe it at first. It was as if nothing existed below Ponce de Leon other than City Hall and CNN and Martin Luther King memorabilia. The maps—the *maps!*—were all bobtailed—cut off at the bottom—so no white tourist would even *think* about wandering down into South Atlanta. . . . [Y]ou get the picture, don't you? How do you segregate white tourists from black people in a city that's 70 percent black? You render the black folks invisible! (185)

CHAPTER 6

PALIMPSEST

The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.

—Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*

Performed Portraits

Palimpsest by artists Monica Duncan and Neil Fried is an ongoing exploration of performance and urban space in digital media. Although described by Fried as a multi-part art project eventually to encompass portraiture, landscape, online social networking, and dance, all of the components completed thus far have been video representations of the human figure, often in undefined or indefinable spaces. These components have been designed as standalone works, comprehensible without reference to other parts of the work yet to be created.

Monica Duncan is a media artist and sculptor, has shown work at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, BS1 (Beijing), the LA Freewaves Festival, and other venues. She is currently a graduate student in visual arts at University of California, San Diego. Neil Fried is the founder and head of the Railroad Earth production facility in Atlanta and has shown art work in New York, California and throughout Atlanta.¹⁶

¹⁶ http://www.marciawoodgallery.com/artist/duncan-odell/intromonica_neil.html

To produce the work, various members of the Residency Arts Workshop (RAW) at Railroad Earth were prompted in an interview process with a series of speculative questions. The questions were designed to elicit some altered or alternate version of performer's "real" identity. For example, subjects might be asked, "Who would you be if you were one of your ancestors?" or "Where would you be if you had followed an alternative career path you considered when younger?" The questions were not designed to elicit pure fantasy, but subjects are invited to engage in a speculative reimagining of their own lives. Each character thus produced was given a new name. Sometimes there a vague connection to the subject's real name is detectable (e.g., Monica Duncan became "Duncan Dane"), other times no such connection is evident.

Each subject then becomes a performer. He or she is recorded on digital video moving in some way or performing some action typical of the character they have created. Using custom software programmed with Max/MSP/Jitter, video from the performance is mixed in real time by "siphoning off" the video stream to a memory buffer. Video is then reintroduced back into the main video stream at quasi-random intervals adding a new video layer to the existing video. The layers interact with one another based on the luminosity of each layer. Performers then write and record their own narration at a later date, which is then edited by the artists and added to the video as an audio track.

The final effect is a partly lyrical, partly glitch aesthetic rendering of bodies in unfluid motion around some central cryptic action. Because the narration consists of a hypothetical narrative, it often has the discomfiting effect of lying in some indeterminate position between truth and falsehood. The artists call their process "encaustic video"

referencing the artistic technique of building up successive layers of wax on wood to form an image.



6.1 *Palimpsest*, still from video. Courtesy Neil Fried.

The project takes its name from the layering effect of a literal palimpsest and its relationship to memory. Memory is invoked here in psychological, technological and historical terms. As with an actual palimpsest, the artists reference memory retained but only imperfectly and after many attempts at erasure. The typical use of the memory buffer is turned on end as it becomes not an instrument of flawless preservation, but an instrument of distortion.

In its various incarnations, *Palimpsest* has consisted of versions deployed in the physical space of Atlanta, as well as versions mounted in a traditional gallery space, specifically at Marcia Wood Gallery in Atlanta's Castleberry Hill.



6.2 *Palimpsest*, still from video. Courtesy Neil Fried.

The work has been performed once on the outdoor grounds of the Railroad Earth studio building near the campus of Emory University and once at Le Flash 2009, a multimedia festival in Atlanta, in a street setting. At its Railroad Earth showing, the audience was stationary while the video portraits were projected along with other images from the inside of the building out through the windows. The event was staged as an outdoor performance, much like an outdoor musical concert. At Le Flash, the audience was mobile, but within the context of an outdoor media festival. This atmosphere creates

a sort of synapse in the urban space, a moment in which the city is not really the city, but instead a semi-private sort of theater or great hall in which the normal context of the city becomes submerged and many of the behavioral codes of city life are suspended (Goffman, *Behavior* 21).

Within this context of no context, the artists set up a demonstration of the *Palimpsest* process in a driveway adjacent to Marcia Wood Gallery. As spectators ambled into the driveway, their image would be caught on a camera, often in some prolonged interaction with an interviewer stationed there. Upon walking around the corner, a screen displayed real-time mixed video of passersby from throughout the night interacting in “encaustic video” layers.

Palimpsest enfolds complex tensions with its own status as an artifact embedded in its cultural and physical context. It leverages the privileges of flânerie as a production strategy, but not without complexity. The work takes the notion of urban space as theater quite seriously, but in some manifestations also risks collapsing the particularities that would make the artifact a truly en-racinating one.

On her web site, Duncan describes their work as “performed portraiture” in which “we create and name a part of ourselves we wish to explore, expose, kill, or make love to. Inhabitants of an invisible city, they are virtual traces of light which transcribe trajectories of identity not fully seen in everyday life.”¹⁷

The project’s conceit of creating new parts of selves pulls the subject outside of herself and causes her to interact with herself in the third person. Indeed, subjects are

¹⁷ <http://www.monicaduncan.net/article/10/palimpsest-portraits>

specifically instructed to talk about themselves in the third person in order to invite a sense of freedom to develop alternate lives. Yet it is not the relationship of actor to role that is being reproduced, but rather the relationship between the flâneur and the face in the crowd. Fried describes the process thusly:

It's not an acting exercise. We didn't want them to act. We wanted them to find parts of themselves, traces of character, for instance, how you feel when you hang out with a certain friend. Or maybe you're on some career path now, but when you were seven years old you thought you were going to be something else. Imagine what you would be like at this age as that other thing. Lots of different ways to coach people to try to find something. And because it's you—because it's that person—you don't have writer's block. There's plenty that people can say about these aspects of self. And so people very fluidly were able to—with a little bit of coaching—people were very fluidly able to be right in character.

In parallel terms, Baudelaire disavows the actual “Mr. G” described in “The Painter of Modern Life” in favor of an imagined one:

[W]e shall suppose that all I have to say concerning his character, so curiously and mysteriously brilliant, has been suggested, with greater or less accuracy, by his work alone; that it is all poetical supposition, conjecture, a product of my imagination. (29)

Both the *Palimpsest* process and Baudelaire's tactics here recall Baudelaire's characterization of the flâneur as someone who "enters as he likes into each man's personality," (*Spleen* 20) that is, every individual becomes a blank screen for the active injection of an imagined self. In the case of *Palimpsest*, the self itself becomes empty for a play of projections of alternate selves.

It is a sincere imagining that *Palimpsest* calls for, not a cynical one (Goffman, *Presentation*). Not a con job, but a faith in the process of imaginative projection. Again, Baudelaire uses similar terms, praising Mr. G.'s mastery of "being sincere without being ridiculous." (33)

This process leaves the audience at a secondary remove as they watch less a performance and more the documentation of a set of processes that supplant the viewer's voyeuristic impulses with the performer's voyeurism onto his or her own life. The audience becomes the watcher watching the watcher. The audience is removed from the moment of dramatic action, a pleasure reserved mainly for the performers rather than the spectators.

Duncan and Fried have designed a third public event planned to take place at the former Fulton Cotton Mill in Cabbagetown. This section of Atlanta to the east of downtown was established around the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills in the early 1880s. It quickly became the home to a largely poor and working-class Appalachian workforce, which supplied the mills' workforces. The last mill closed in 1978¹⁸, putting most Cabbagetown residents out of work. Cabbagetown has been undergoing a gradual

¹⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fulton_Bag_and_Cotton_Mills

gentrification process since the early 1990s with the usual mix of artists and entrepreneurs breathing economic vitality into the area. (Rutheiser, 128) The cotton mill has since been converted into loft housing.

Duncan and Fried will invite former mill workers to engage in the process of imaginative self-creation that previous installments have used, but with a focus on stories about the mill building itself. The videos will then be projected on the windows of the mill from within the building. There will also be live professional actors in an additional performance aspect.



6.3 Fulton Cotton Mill today. Image taken from: Promove.com.

Similar to previous versions of the work, the former mill workers will not relate stories of their lives, but a blend of fact and fiction positioned orthogonally to actual

lives. According to Fried, audience members should come away feeling as though they've read a short story.

With the cotton mill event as designed, *Palimpsest* goes from the semi-public spaces of an art gallery driveway or the outdoor grounds of a small, private building to a more open, semi-public arena. Here, the dynamics of place, content and context are likely to be felt most keenly, and the meaning of artifacts in particular places perhaps most fraught. In this vein, Fried does articulate a general theory of the hermeneutics of urban space:

A city is a place that has many ghosts and many shadows. The events of our lives are embodied, you know? They're not taking place in outer space. They're in rooms and houses and buildings, in yards and forests and all of these things. Memories are very much wrapped up with the places where they happen.

Memory is again invoked as constitutive of human experience. However, the memories of the mill workers become a casualty in the work, a footnote to exuberant forms of imagination and wondering.

The tradition of the flâneur comes again to the fore in the selection of the mill as a site, this time filtered through the flâneur as photographer. Susan Sontag in her essay *On Photography* identifies the flâneur photographer with his attraction to the city's "dark seamy corners, its neglected populations." (55–56) Sontag goes on to describe other attributes of the flâneur photographer who imagines himself as uncovering a hidden truth

“often identified with the vanishing past.” (56) The mill then stands in for a dark terra incognita awaiting the bright flash of a video projection.



6.4 *Palimpsest*, installation view (video as projected in windows). Courtesy Neil Fried.

Although *Palimpsest* is certain to enliven the space in which it takes place, it risks employing imagination as a buffer against, rather than a conduit to, a meaningful understanding or appraisal of the space it occupies. It risks turning the former mill workers into bits of local color embedded in the spectacle, raw material for art audiences to have a fictive encounter with the past and then move on.

CHAPTER 7

ECHO ATLANTA

We can cut wherever we please.

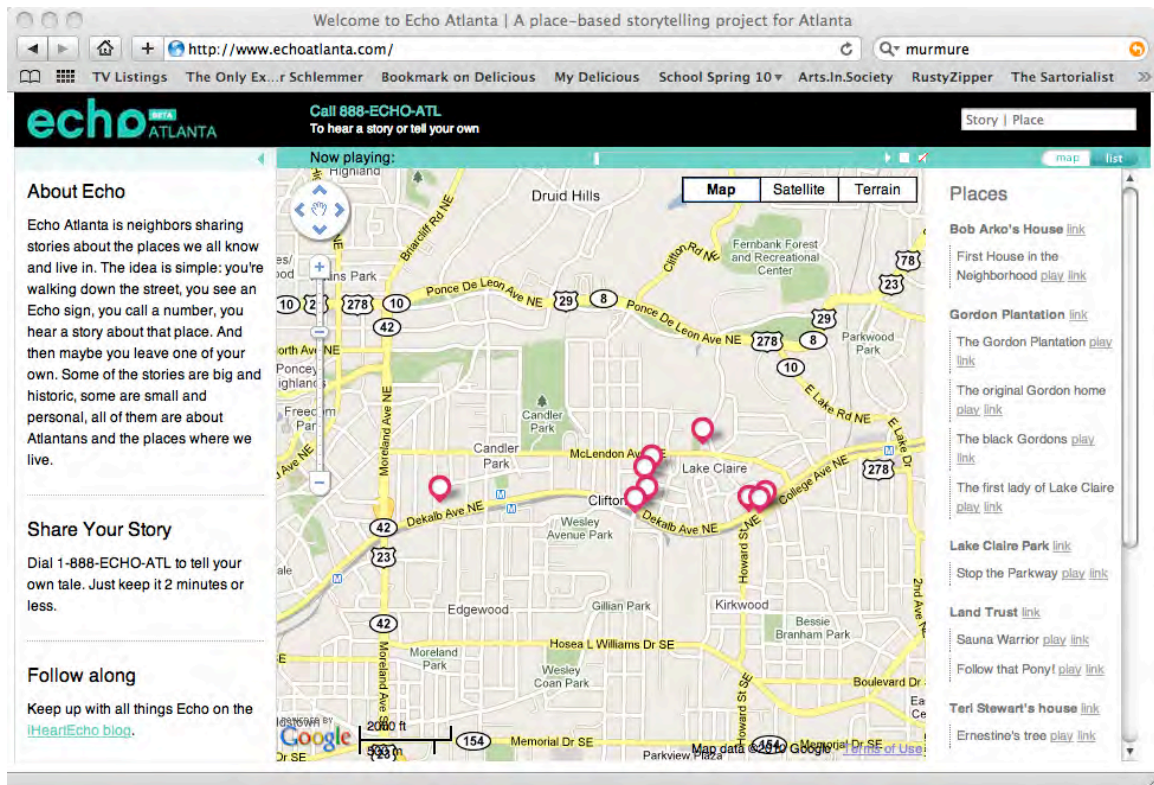
—Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*

Echo Atlanta by artist-designers Karyn Y. Lu and Lila King is a cross-platform, public storytelling project, piloted in the Lake Claire neighborhood of Atlanta. Karyn Y. Lu is a graduate of Georgia Tech's Digital Media master's program, and produced a project similar to *Echo* titled *Storyscape* as part of Art in Freedom Park with classmates David Jimison and John Goetzinger. Both Lu and King are media producers for CNN's iReport.com.

In *Echo Atlanta*, a toll-free number allows people in the neighborhood to call and listen to stories left by their neighbors about the local area. Alternatively, callers may leave their own story for others to hear. The audio stories are stored in a database. As of this writing, the public phone number makes available 16 stories, all but 1 related to the Lake Claire neighborhood. The artists indicated having recorded many stories that have not yet been added to the database. Each story is titled and often the title contains the storyteller's full name. The stories also reside on a coordinated web site on which every story so far is identified with a full name.

Eventually, *Echo* is designed to work with a system of highly visible, recognizable, public signs with the *Echo* logo, phone number, and instructions printed on

them. For the pilot project, the designers have recruited specific storytellers from throughout the neighborhood based on personal referrals propagated through social networks of neighbors living in the area. They aim to create a growing database of stories that includes a mix of “curated” stories specifically recruited for the project and stories left by neighbors who spontaneously choose to participate (Lu)¹⁹.



7.1 *Echo Atlanta* web site, screen capture.

Although the audio stories are available at the *Echo Atlanta* web site, they can only be accessed and not recorded online. The phone number, of course, works from any

¹⁹ All direct quotes in this chapter attributed to the artists were obtained from a personal joint interview with Karyn Y. Lu and Lila King unless identified otherwise. In each case the name of the speaker will be identified in parentheses following the quotation.

location, however. Currently, the designers must upload the stories manually to the *Echo Atlanta* database and web site; future plans, however, call for an automated system that transfers stories from the phone system directly into the corresponding database.

Although the project is largely limited to Lake Claire, Lu and King envision *Echo Atlanta* as a citywide project in the future. In addition, they plan to create an “open source” (Lu) kit that would allow others to bring a version of *Echo* into their own neighborhoods potentially anywhere in the world. The artists insisted that they would not reproduce the *Echo* project in cities other than their own, stating that an important aspect of the project is that someone with local knowledge guides it with an understanding of local conditions.

The 16 stories added so far comprise a mix of small-scale personal recollections and sketches of neighborhood history, both recent and distant. As intended, all of the stories are place-based, centering on a specific house, a specific road, or some other land feature. Examples include (a) the story of a runaway pony from a child’s birthday party on Arizona Avenue; (b) an account of the successful fight to stop the city from building the so-called Presidential Highway through the area, which construction would have severed the neighborhood from the Emory University neighborhoods and the North side of Atlanta. (The storyteller remarks tellingly that, “Usually those kind of barriers create a division.”) (c) the story of the ashes of a former resident sprinkled on the site of a beloved Magnolia tree, which died at around the same time as the resident.

Of all the digital media projects considered in this thesis, *Echo Atlanta*’s inclusion as an art work is most tenuous. However, its overlap in the aesthetic realm qualify it as worthy of attention. Although it may or may not be art as measured against any particular

ontological definition, it is designed to operate as a non-instrumental aesthetic and contemplative experience. In this way, its standards of success or failure are likely to be more akin to a public artwork than, say, a standard public telephone system.

Echo Atlanta's ability to operate as an aesthetic experience have more valence in light of the recent tradition of so-called relational aesthetics as described by Nicolas Bourriaud in his book of that name. Bourriaud assigns the term "relational art" to open-ended, usually nonobjective art works beginning in the 1990s that began to take on the politicized project of re-imaging art in the context of a society shifting from a goods-based economy to a service-based economy. Rather than art dedicated to the art object that asserts a private symbolic space, relational art is often project-based work that takes as its space of signification the whole breadth of relations between members of an imagined community (Bishop 53–54). Works of relational art include serving dinner to a random assortment of neighbors (Rirkrit Tiravanija at Project Row Houses), allowing gallery goers to trade unwanted clothing (Stuart Keeler at Gallery Stokes), or providing simulated therapy sessions to audience members (Bert Rodriguez at the Whitney Museum). Often these works bear no differentiating markers from the more mundane social actions they resemble and claim the status of art based entirely on context (it takes place within a space dedicated to the exhibition of art), personnel (it is conducted by an artist), or both. Although the artist-designers of *Echo Atlanta* do not explicitly invoke relational art, it certainly would have been difficult to consider this project as a holistic aesthetic experience without reference to its predecessors in relational art of the 1990s.

Echo Atlanta maintains tensions with the precepts of flânerie even more complex than those of *Palimpsest*. It both challenges and accedes to latter-day flâneur desires in nearly equal measure.

Pedestrianism—To Walk in Lake Claire

Echo Atlanta is consciously designed to promote pedestrianism in a city that is often hostile to walking and biking as forms of mobility (see Chapter 5). King and Lu see their project as a way to “get people outside walking and biking” to “learn more about everyday spaces that they sort of whiz by in their cars and never think about” (Lu). Pedestrianism is not simply a hoped-for byproduct of the work; it is its *raison d’être*.

King and Lu’s active promotion of pedestrianism is framed with reference to neither personal health nor ecological practices, but rather with reference to the web of cultural associations that inhere to walking as an urban activity. In many contexts, urban walking conjures the crowded sidewalks of midtown Manhattan and the gracious strolling of Haussmann’s Paris. It likewise references the generic downtowns of numerous smaller cities built according to the traditional morphologies of urban density. Walking then becomes not merely a form of locomotion, but, as for the flâneur, a marker of urbane sophistication, even if only as simulacrum.

Being a walking city is really important. I think it’s Atlanta’s evolution into becoming like a real city of the future. I feel like it’s catching up and it’ll get there. I certainly don’t think that *Echo* single-handedly will get it there, but I kind of see us as part of like a movement of people who are interested in making

Atlanta more walking friendly. Our hope has always been that we can partner with other organizations in a similar space (Lu).

The image of walkability as concomitant with urbanity, however, runs directly counter to the main thrust of Atlanta's physical and cultural experience. Whether or not particular individuals hold walkability in high regard, the city's spatial infrastructure reflects the dominance of the automobile, and those with the means to do so, usually acquiesce to its relentless spatial logic in the way that yields the least friction, that is, by driving. I do not mean to advance an absolutist argument about whether walking is good or driving is bad; my intent rather is to point to the troubles inherent in designing for walkability in a city whose very infrastructure militates against it.



7.2 View down Lake Claire street. Note the lack of pedestrianism and shortage of visible sidewalks. Photo by author.

The Lake Claire area itself has significant barriers to walkability: sidewalks are intermittent. The commercial strip of restaurants and shops centered mainly on McClendon Avenue is mostly segregated from residential development in a single strip of low-rise commercial development. And an entirely unattractive cement retaining wall along Dekalb Avenue discourages walking along the community's southern boundary, which is nevertheless one of only two routes traversing the neighborhood east to west. Density throughout is low. Lake Claire, though by no means an extreme case, brings to mind Rem Koolhaas's characterization of the city of Atlanta: "It is a sparse, thin carpet of habitation, a kind of surpematist composition of little fields" (75).

In its physical manifestation *Echo* is designed for a city at odds with the city that actually exists. Rather than responding to the existing morphology and attempting to provoke a critical engagement with it, *Echo* insists unilaterally on the morphology of a generic "walking friendly" city. It attempts to will alternative engagements with the city into being, not by making the inhabitant conscious of the existing constraints of space and its potentially pathological morphologies, but by pretending that an alternative urban condition already pertains.

King and Lu do admirably keep the human inhabitant at the center of their calculation. They emphasize walking based on a belief that walking is "human scale," that walking makes the resident more likely to interact with other people. Their unassailable desire is to break down the perceived and actual alienation that comes with living in a city of atoms. However, their tactic of ignoring actual morphological conditions rather than engaging them, may ultimately prove limiting.



7.3 Dekalb Avenue in Lake Claire. Photo by author.

The designers tie the activity of walking to the human scale, an idea whose lineage traces back to the flâneur, the Situationists and to de Certeau's notion of walking as a speech act. Yet such an identification is not inevitable. Nigel Thrift an apologist of the automobile in "Driving in the City," reasserts the idea that the human need not be equated with "the near and local, the slow and the small" (54) and that driving may be regarded as being as experientially rich as walking. Indeed a focus on walking as a discrete sphere of mobility isolated from others may foreclose on a rich field of potential kinds of interactions with space and other people.

Everyday Histories

On the other hand, *Echo* resists the seduction of flânerie in its means of constructing social knowledge. Unlike in the flâneur's cosmology, imagination holds a much reduced place in *Echo*'s epistemology. To the contrary, gaps in knowledge of place are presumed to be fillable by other people (and only by other people) mediated by real encounters with space. Interactors are encouraged not just to eavesdrop on the narratives deposited by neighbors, but to deposit their own stories in turn. The result is a kind of mass asynchronous conversation, using place as a negotiated repository of shared experience.

One of *Echo*'s immediate predecessors in format and content was [*murmur*], a similar audio, place-based storytelling system first launched in Toronto's Kensington Market in 2003 (murmurtoronto.ca). [*murmur*] purports to present "history from the ground up, told by the voices that are often overlooked when the stories of cities are told." Relying less on tropes of personal intimacy and the "secret" nature of everyday life, *Echo* shares the goal of capturing everyday histories:

It's the democratization of history, right? Like, all the tiny events that happen to all sorts of people, whether it's printed in history books that you learn in school or whether they're things that happen to people that you never read about. They all inform a place and its meaning. So the idea with *Echo* is that we would sort of mash all those things up and put them together and give them all equal weight.

(King)

Echo takes the notion seriously that people's knowledge about place and their investment of memories in space matters. Indeed, the designers elevate personal stories to the primary way of understanding that space.²⁰ The work configures the self not as a roving, insatiable eye, but as one node in a network of collaboratively negotiated meaning.

The choice of medium becomes key here. Lu and King chose not to use any number of available video formats, but settled instead on audio. With its privileging of the ear over the eye, audio allows the interactor to engage both the story and the physical surroundings simultaneously. "The idea is to resurrect ghosts for you in that space" (Lu). Through audio, the designers avoid removing people from the very space they hope to activate through their presence. The gaze once dominant dematerializes the body and renders it a memory (Irigaray). Through audio, the paradigm of the flâneur is overturned. Even the name refers to the idea of sound reverberating around space with no reference to ocular fact.

Voices, narrative and dialog enacted in public space literally break the urban stance of public silence sketched in Chapter 4. The flâneur depends on the imposition of silence; *Echo*, like an echo, insists on its own sound producing power. A comparison to another pedestrian-based telephony project is fruitful: Whereas *Pedestrian: A Walking*

²⁰ This feature of *Echo* constitutes a subtle, yet meaningful departure from its predecessor [*murmur*], which in its descriptive collateral makes much greater use of the language of personal self-disclosure and discovery. [*murmur*] presents stories "as personal as the relationship people have with the spaces they inhabit. Secret histories are unearthed, private truths unveiled and tales as diverse as the city itself are discovered and shared." [*murmur*], which does not allow passersby to contribute stories spontaneously to the overall portfolio of narratives, is more concerned with the process of idiosyncratic, intimate disclosure than with arriving at a meaningful knowledge of place that translates to anything greater than a collection of random, intimate anecdotes.

Tour for Multiple Voices and Portable Phones—New York City as described in Chapter 3 uses many of the same components—mobile phones, public space, walking—*Echo* envisions communication as two-way and decentralized, rather than issuing from a central authority and proceeding unidirectionally from speaker to audience. *Echo* also envisions knowledge production as mass co-production of meaning, not through a reproduction of eavesdropping.

Echo wants a crowd. Lacking a real one in streets of Lake Claire, it recreates a crowd through telepresence; neighbors spectrally float in and out unpredictably and serendipitously through the consciousness of the interactor. But *Echo* offers a dramatically different relationship paradigm to the face in the crowd than the one offered by the flâneur: engagement over voyeurism and attention over imagination.

Echo's two-way communication, its reliance on real information about the shared asset of place, and its privileging of verbal exchange over visual voyeurism produces a tight linking of place, story and public discourse. It is an example of en-racinating media insofar as it tends to imbue public space with specific and collective meaning rather than erode collective meaning. Stories involve both the teller and the hearer. Physical movement is tied to an understanding of social and historical knowledge based on the vernacular knowledges of those in the community.

This structure reverses the flâneur's impulse to occupy external subjectivities and supplant external realities with an aggrandized self. Instead the subject seeks out real stories—often seemingly minor, even trivial stories, but real nonetheless—that have been attached to place.

My claims to stories being “real,” should not be confused with claims that the stories inevitably embody absolute, objective truth. Lu and King themselves admit the possibilities of mistaken memories and even outright exaggerations of the fish-story type. In fact, they have already encountered an alternative version of the runaway pony story that contradicts the first version. They have not yet uploaded the alternative version, though they plan to do so in the future.

Storytelling shaped by biases of politics and temperament constitute another treacherous narrative territory: One storyteller recounted a valiant fight against real estate developers attempting to destroy a range of neighborhood trees. Lu and King have plans to interview the developers with the presumption that the developers will present a radically different version of the story. All of these stories, not necessarily true in any objective sense, are nevertheless socially real. They are asserted as carriers of meaning and value on which to construct a shared reality. They are not self-consciously imaginary, not constructions in the mind based only on evidence offered to the eye.

These messy confrontations at the seams of vested interests, the allowance for struggle and argument over the facts of history, even small facts, provide an opening for real, democratic confrontation. Similar to *TexTales*’ construction of public opinion in public space, *Echo*’s seams offer at least the potential to move beyond the notion of “community as immanent togetherness,” (Bishop 67) and instead locate community in the “jolts” that must occur to produce “that sense of tentativeness about his own beliefs which every civilized person must have,” and which is the true basis of public discourse (Sennett 296).

One Infrastructure After Another

Lu and King consistently use the metaphor of infrastructure to describe their project, calling it “a place-based storytelling infrastructure for Atlanta” (King). If we take this seriously as infrastructure, then parts of Dourish and Bell’s four-part description of ways in which technological infrastructure provides frameworks for ascribing meaning and function to space may prove helpful in setting expectations for how *Echo* might behave socially and spatially.

Dourish and Bell sketch out the ways in which technological infrastructures embedded in space organized both physically and culturally force a “re-encounter” with physical space experienced culturally across multiple layers of infrastructure, new and old. Ubiquitous computing has traditionally failed to account for these existing topologies and how the landscape must be experienced through them (14). As en-racinating media, *Echo Atlanta* carefully considers that the space in which they intervene already has meanings and histories and that these meanings are arrived at collaboratively. Their attempt at promoting pedestrianism locks together mobility with collaboratively generated meaning of space and with the social experience of meeting neighbors. *Echo* is an infrastructure for forming relationships with “people you don’t already know” (King).

Dourish and Bell also note, however, that infrastructures are as likely to reinforce as destabilize existing institutional arrangements (3). Nothing about the ostensible revolutionary nature of digital media guarantees revolutionary outcomes. Rather, infrastructures are often conditioned by the infrastructures that precede and underpin them (Star). Typical of this process, Lu and King first sought to build *Echo* over the municipal transportation infrastructure of MARTA:

The original idea was that we would start with Atlanta as a city. And we would start specifically at the MARTA stations. The idea is that you could walk from any MARTA station. You could abandon your car and start at a MARTA station and we would use those as, like, centers for little story maps. (King)

This architecture was quickly abandoned, however as the scale shifted rapidly. Choosing Lake Claire, Lu's home neighborhood, as a pilot location, the designers began collecting interviews by working through networks of neighbors. This process yielded a large amount of information, and Lu and King decided as a result that the entirety of Atlanta was unmanageable for the project's structure. The neighborhood then, rather than the entire MARTA system, became the nucleus of the project. The shift in scale perspective led in turn to a shift in the design goals: *Echo* became a project for neighborhoods, rather than a project for cities. Lu and King plan to reproduce this orientation toward neighborhood in other areas of Atlanta, as well as making the project's resources available for neighborhoods elsewhere.

That the designers shifted their perspective in order to more manageably encounter the space they were working with is a defensible and sincere²¹ reaction to circumstances. The sincere reaction becomes problematic, however, when accounting for Atlanta's history of intentionally breaking up space and frustrating mobility. The

²¹ Again, I invoke Goffman's use of the word to mean narrowly that there is no evidence that the designers' disbelieve their own self-report as their motives. The reaction was not intended to disguise some ulterior decision-making process.

tendency to become enveloped inside neighborhoods is programmed into the spatial logic of Atlanta usually with real social and economic consequences. As with the issue of pedestrianism, the designers ignore this spatial logic rather than question it, even as they provide personal anecdotes that reveal their consciousness of it:

[My boyfriend] and I take walks all the time with our dog and sometimes you'll turn a corner, you're like, "Oh my God!" You kind of like redraw the map of Atlanta you have in your brain almost because you did not realize these two [areas] were so close to each other. And you could totally walk from neighborhood to neighborhood. (Lu)

Despite this awareness, *Echo*'s new infrastructure has been trapped in the old. For example, the status of Dekalb Avenue as a hard boundary that coincides both for the neighborhood and for the project goes unchallenged. In the city, so to in the media design, it serves as yet another divisive east-west boundary in a city rife with such boundaries in the guise of thoroughfares (Flowers 44).

Using Atlanta's infrastructure of neighborhoods, without interrogating it allows *Echo*'s designers to ignore larger questions of mobility perhaps more meaningful in an Atlanta context. They have taken a problem of mobility and reduced it to a problem of pedestrianism. In the process they reproduce—and perhaps even risk further legitimizing—Atlanta's ubiquitous spatial fractures. Addressing larger issues of mobility might even support *Echo*'s proclaimed goal as a "community building project" (Lu). They already invite the possibility of engagement and conflict along fault lines in the

narrative space of the neighborhood's stories. To address mobility itself with similarly democratic underpinnings would extend rather than refute the spatial logic it already seeks.

CHAPTER 8

THE ORACLE @ WIFI

In the historical unfolding of Western civilization, occult revivals have attended such crucial periods of transition from one cultural matrix to another.

—Edward A. Tiryakian “Toward the Sociology of Esoteric Culture”

Telling the Future

Beth Lilly’s *The Oracle @ WiFi* was a multi-year, cell-phone-enabled art project of public divination based in Atlanta. Although it had no fixed, physical presence in public space, it involved a series of social interactions using public and semi-public spaces. *The Oracle @ WiFi* places processes carried out in public in the center of its symbolic universe and assigns them the aesthetic value of art.

The project ran between March 2006 and April 2009. During the entire run of the project, the artist set aside the seventh day of every month to move discursively around the city during all available daylight hours. Lilly used personal errands to loosely structure her spatial agenda, but freely allowed interruptions, detours and side trips to influence the movement.

Throughout the day, the artist received phone calls on a dedicated cell phone line from people responding to email offers for a free fortune telling or clairvoyant reading. Following instructions provided in the email, the caller (querent) requested only that a reading be done, providing a first name and an email address. The artist then immediately

began the process of taking three photos of internal or external spaces beginning wherever she happened to be when the call was received. A cell phone was used for the photos. The photography would take anywhere from 5 minutes up to (rarely) 1 hour.

The selection of subjects was not random. Rather, the artist sought out objects and scenarios in the environment that would seem to be rich in potential symbolism. She further sought out the unusual:

I would say it would be based on intuition. I would be looking for something that grabbed my attention. A lot of times it was something that was out of place.

Something that was unusual. Or these surprising things that happened to be unfolding right there in front of me, you know? So when I'm choosing a subject I'm trying to be very intuitive and not looking for the easy images.

Although the artist worked somewhat intuitively, she did leverage her skills as a professional photographer by making aesthetic and compositional choices that would lead to visually interesting images. She also edited the photos heavily, deleting uninteresting or poorly shot images to arrive at a final set of three photographs.

The three photos were emailed back to the querent, after which the artist then called the querent and asked for the querent's original question. A reading would then be performed over the phone, both parties having access to the photos taken. The readings emerged from the artist's intuitive interpretations of the photos she had just taken, the new information of the caller's question now serving a framing and limiting function to suggest some kinds of interpretations as more relevant than others. Querents sometimes

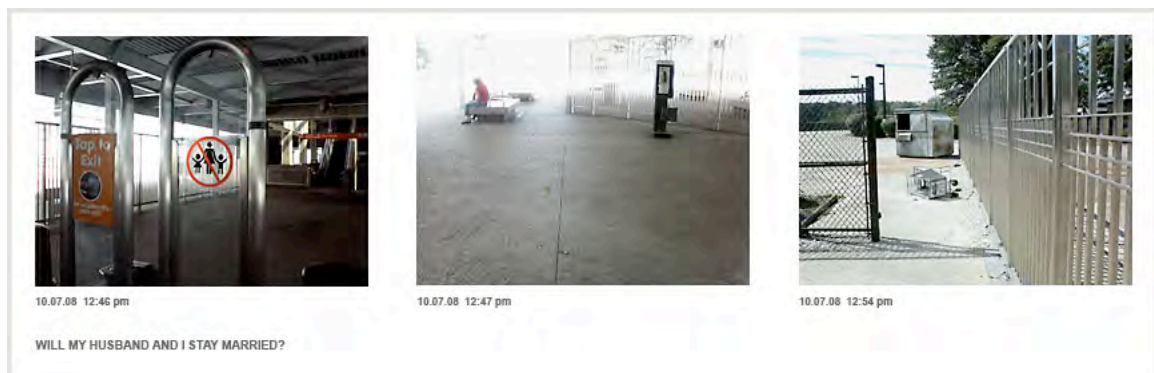
verbally participated with the artist in divining meaning from the photographs and sometimes continued the interpretation process through email exchanges.

The initial publicity for the project was executed entirely through email and word of mouth. However, knowledge about the project began to spread without direct effort from the artist via viral emails and occasional press coverage of the project. On at least two occasions, arts organizations held special events that included promoting the project as part of their programs. At its height, *The Oracle @ WiFi* became so popular the artist received a nearly continuous, uninterrupted stream of phone calls on the appointed day. The proportion of callers from Atlanta ranged between 10% and 40%, although sometimes none of the callers appeared to be from the local area. Calls came from as far away as France, and Lilly's project ultimately acquired approximately 30 repeat callers, some of whom called on nearly every occasion during the entire three-year run of the project.

The photos ranged from images of mundane features of urban public space (e.g., a parking deck, store windows, the rear of an ambulance, car wash employees) to idiosyncratic urban oddities (e.g., a miniature replica of the Statue of Liberty) to semi-private internal spaces or objects presented largely without context (e.g., a karate studio, a book on a MARTA train, a file drawer).

As an example, a querent called at approximately 12:45 on October 7, 2008 as the artist was exiting the MARTA station at Lenox. In rapid succession, she photographed the automated exit gate, a distant pair of figures on a bench, and an overturned shopping cart near a dumpster. Upon callback, the querent then asked the question: "Will my husband and I stay married?"

The question guided the artist to focus in first photo on the icon of a woman with children, which was covered by a buster symbol. This image suggested to the artist a rejection or denial of family, particularly of a female with family. The second image, although apparently of a lone figure, was actually of a couple, isolated and engaged in what appeared to be an unpleasant conversation. The third image poignantly suggested failure, refuse, and loss. The three photos seemed to call into question the prospects for the caller's marriage.



8.1 *The Oracle @ WiFi*, “Will my husband and I stay married?” ©2009 Beth Lilly

Questions from callers were almost uniformly personal in nature, seeking advanced knowledge of job prospects, the outcome of strife in relationships, or precarious health situations. A smaller percentage of querents requested less a glimpse of the future and more advice on a current situation (e.g., “Should I take the job that was offered to me?” “How can I help my son like school?”). A smattering asked metaphysical questions of a nonpersonal nature (e.g., “Are women equal to men in the eyes of God”). The artist presumed sincerity on the part of the questioner and provided readings accordingly.

Telepathy and Serendipity

It is important to note that the artist considers herself an artist, not a clairvoyant in the sense that she might imagine having some privileged access to esoteric knowledge of occult forces. Participants were aware that she was an artist and that they were participating in an art work. Lilly freely admits:

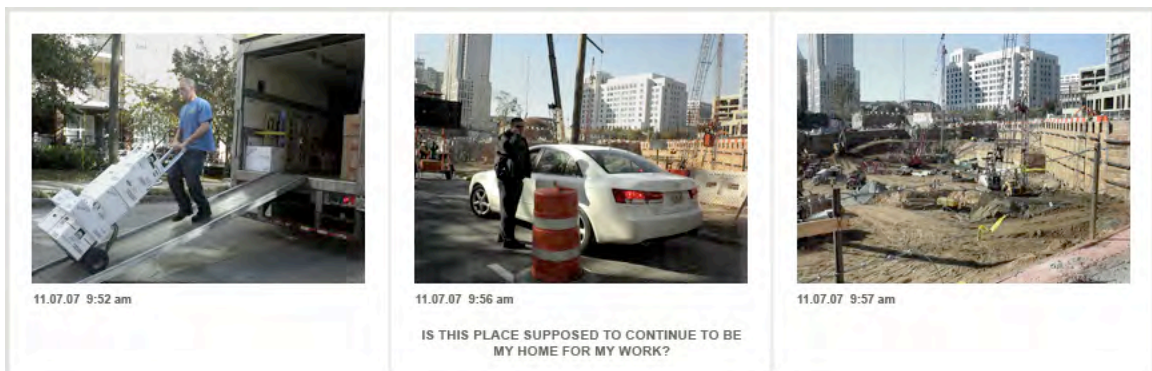
It's all very subjective. And I think you'd see in it what you thought all along, or what you wanted to see, you know? I think people need an answer to their questions that they didn't want to face up to. . . . And other times, you're not sure how you feel about something. So you toss a coin, you know. Heads or tails? And it's like, "Oh, heads! I wanted it to be tails." Then it's revealed to yourself what you really feel when you look at it.

That Lilly's knowledge about the future is no more privileged than the querent's is ostensibly known to both parties. Still, several hundred callers over the span of three years entered into a social contract in which Lilly would provide hidden answers to life mysteries and the future.

I dismiss the notion that callers considered the practice a joke or were simply going along for fun. Repeat calling over months or years, and questions such as "In what ways might I be failing to receive the very things that provide/enable spiritual growth," and "A group of associates wants to do something for me in my time of major medical

issues. What do I ask for?” and “Does God exist?” point to a serious engagement with the process and at least a provisional belief that the response will be a meaningful one.

Townsend’s notion of mobile communications media as “telepathic communication” becomes fruitful in parsing this seeming paradox. By “telepathic communication,” Townsend refers to “the current and future set of personal mobile communication devices, services and infrastructure—from simple mobile phones to immersive, shared augmented reality.” Characterizing mobile devices as an “extension of the self, rather than exclusively a media for social communication,” engineering and technology have been leveraged to bring spatially distant psyches into contact in spontaneous and direct ways traditionally understood to belong exclusively to the occult realm of telepathy (*Thinking* 43).



8.2 *The Oracle @ WiFi*, “Is this place supposed to continue to be my home for my work?” ©2009 Beth Lilly

This infrastructure of spontaneity creates the conditions to process the grounded experience of space cooperatively and to co-create meaning on an ad-hoc basis. Within this semantic matrix, the cell phone technology itself functions as catalyst. It is the virtual crystal ball, the tarot card and the tea leaf. And although Lilly herself may admit to no

particular possession of magic, she manifestly manipulates a magic-laden process of serial serendipities enabled by the already-magic mobile device. It is in response to this mix of serendipity and engineering that callers routinely trusted the artist to arrive at insight into their most troubling questions.

The magic precedes the form that expresses it. Lilly identified the sense of ad-hoc serendipity as an organizing structural principle from the project's inception:

Cell phone cameras had recently come out and I was going, you know, "What does this technology allow me to do?" Somebody could call me from anywhere in the world and I could take a picture right then, right there and email it back. And then I go, "Well, why would anyone call me for a photograph?"

Although the artist sensed the telepathic affordances of the device, the metaphor of divination followed later. The precise form of the social contact via divination arose to express the telepathy of the communication network, not the other way around.

A Place of Place

Beth Lilly en-racimates her digital media practice by asserting the importance of place as both concrete and grounded in specific experience. Rather than imposing the idea of "place" as an abstract notion to be rendered visible by a digital media artifact, each *Oracle @ WiFi* reading creates an entirely provisional, ground-up reckoning of territory based on the concrete movement of the artist's own body through space. The photographs do not illustrate a pre-conceived notion of a neighborhood, a district or even

a city. Rather, serendipity becomes a spatial tactic to construct meaningful territories on the fly that straddle the space of physical location and the domain of personal symbolism.

The ad-hoc manufacture of place is conditioned not only by the artist's physical mobility, but also by the web of social encounters and conditions within she moves:

As time went on, more and more people became suspicious about people with cell phone cameras. It seemed at first that it was no big [deal]. "There's a crazy lady who's photographing a trashcan," you know? And as time went on, people started to associate people photographing with cell phones with some sort of nefarious . . . you know, it was a child molester or a child kidnapper. I learned early on not to try and photograph children. Or I was spying, some sort of maybe industrial espionage, or casing a place. But they always seemed to equate photographing with a cell phone camera with "They are up to no good." [. . .] At the beginning I think I was better off with a cell phone camera than an SLR [single lens reflex, traditional camera], but definitely towards the end, I think I would have been better off with just an SLR.

Indeed, Townsend calls out the sociopathic underbelly of telepathic communications, remarking that such tactics can be put to innocuous or destructive purposes in equal measure. (*Thinking* 48) Whereas the artist viewed herself in light of the former, many people that she encountered—themselves aware of the cell phone's telepathic capabilities—increasingly assumed the latter. Eventually, security guards,

employees and business owners refused to allow her to take photographs in approximately 20% of cases.

The nightmare was getting stuck at Lenox Square [. . .] I'd be driving by and get a call. It's like, "Gotta pull into this parking lot. Here's my place." It's Lenox Mall, and it's I guess their policy—it's private property. And the security guard at Macy's accused me of checking out the jewelry case at Macy's. He thought I was scoping it out! He escorted me off the premises to my car and it's like, "Get out of here and don't ever come back."

The artist's approach to her territory was consistently in flux and, although loosely structured functionally (around personal errands), radically conditional in nature. Its shape depended largely upon the timing of phone calls not within her control. Extending this radically conditional and porous approach to spatial navigation, the artist used a variety of methods of movement nearly indiscriminately, including public mass transportation, driving, and walking:

There's a lot of walking involved anyhow because you know, I would stop the car, get out and start walking till it was done. Sometimes I just chose to take MARTA instead of driving.

The artist did not valorize any tactic of mobility over any other, treating them instead as coextensive in a undifferentiated field of movement.

Flânerie of the Artist

In previous chapters, I have interrogated works of art largely with respect to the position of the spectator and the ways in which artist might support certain psychological and social orientations to place and abrogate others. Given the wide-ranging movement of the artist in *The Oracle @ WiFi* the question of the author's relationship to the position of the flâneur obviously becomes salient. What positionalities does the artist inhabit and do they recapitulate the privileges of flânerie in outmoded ways?

Key to understanding the artist's positionality vis-à-vis the relationship the work posits with urban space is to move beyond the mere form of the engagement—its flagrant discretionary mobility—and examine also the ends to which it is put. Susan Sontag describes the flâneur photographer as the bearer of the “sustained look downward” (57), the roving eye that turns upon the poor and miserable in order to arrive at a notion of social truth based on an imaginative engagement over a real one.



8.3 *The Oracle @ WiFi*, “Is enlightenment something you achieve or is it the absence of something?”
©2006 Beth Lilly

The aims of *Oracle* however are quite different. The photographs make no claims to objective reality or systematic knowledge that does not also explicitly implicate both

the photographer and the querent. And these meanings are manifestly understood to be situational and wholly the result of an inter-subjective, that is a social, process. According to the artist, “These images would be nothing unless you had the question and the question by itself would be meaningless without the images. So the two depend on each other to have any kind of meaning or value.”

Meaning emerges out of a negotiated exchange between querent and artist through a co-created language of public (urban) space. It does not emerge through the projection of the artist’s imagination or the injection of personality in the public realm. Indeed, the artist took pains to keep her own imagination out of the equation to the extent possible and to create a structure in which co-created meaning would be more likely:

The point of keeping the question secret was I didn’t want my conscious mind conniving and you know: “Ah, their voice sounded like an older person,” you know? “She sounds like a housewife. I think she’s having marital problems!” I didn’t want to start making up stuff like that.

Lilly rejects the entire epistemological framework of the flâneur. She does not attempt to find or recreate the urban crowd where none exists; most photos do not even contain clearly visible people. She does not use her camera as a way to enter into other lives or ferret out some independent notion of social reality that does not also literally implicate her own body. In *The Oracle @ WiFi*, the artist creates none of the apparatus of the latter-day flâneur.

The artist uses discretionary mobility to concretize rather than abstract space. Where the flâneur sees space as the inert medium for the play of consumable spectacles, *Oracle* treats every place as potentially invested with highly particular meanings available for a multitude of simultaneous readings.

Community

Finally, given the project's distance from concepts of the crowd or the city as a pre-constructed physical unit, it is worth considering what concept of community is at play in this work. In fact, upon examination, the work articulates no immediately recognizable notion of community. *Oracle* signifies in the symbolic space of psychological processes rather than social relations. Lilly even specifically objected to attempts to turn the project into something more overtly social: "It was surprisingly personal. [. . .] Some people wanted to strike up an internet kind of friendship and I'm just not interested in that." Instead, the artist builds meaningful interactions based on joint assignment of significance to external symbols, not through the more common method of creating community through personal self-disclosure. In *Oracle*, the artist invents a mode of public discourse in which public space is envisioned anew for the twenty-first century: multiple, layered, provisional, telepathic.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I first briefly sketched the evolution of thinking about ICTs in public space through the lens of urban informatics. Urban Informatics sits at the intersection of information sciences, urban studies, and the social sciences, and places the research emphasis on the effects of technology on people and social patterns. Although the need for attending to infrastructures and context has been well argued, it is less clear what criteria should be brought to bear in a critique of technologies that do not do so. Still less clear are the ways in which technologies may do both.

Second, I took a cue from Williams et al. and presented the figure of the flâneur as a way to get a handle on the many complex issues that surround design for generic global cities and the design that seamlessly follows the logic of placeless capitalism in generically conceived cities. I proposed the concept of “en-racinating” media as an interpretive frame to theorize ICTs that reject the logic of generic globalism and embrace the idea of people’s distinctive experiences in particular places.

Third, I provided a thick description of Atlanta’s urban space including some of the historical determinants that gave it its particular morphology in order to set a context for examining three works of information-based public art in Atlanta.

Finally I read three works, closely focusing where appropriate on the issue of mobility and the ways in which each work could be said to be supporting flânerie, rejecting it, or both. *Palimpsest* relied heavily on the ethos of the flâneur in order to construct its world of imaginative spectacle. *Echo Atlanta* considered space in both

generic, spectacular forms as well as in specific, en-racinating forms. The flâneur was both supported and subverted. *The Oracle @ WiFi* used serendipity to create specific, yet provisional landscapes from which to derive meaning. While enjoying discretionary movement and the use of imagination, the project nevertheless took seriously the urban territory it explored.

As Castells remarked, “Elites are global, people are local.” As the world becomes reconfigured socially through our technologies, we must critically consider the role and character of the places we create. In imagining the consumers of ICTs as simply a reinvention of the global flâneur, we risk encourage spatial relations that are degraded and that treat the local as disposable and generic. Far from augmenting it, deracinated media may tend to erode space and erode public discourse that takes place within it.

As we create new technologies in urban space, we also create social innovations. Pedersen and Vallgård (in Paulos et al.) traced the dangers inherent in introducing new technologies that prompt new social relations: “If we look at many concepts for urban social technology they are not just technological innovations: they also presuppose a new social practice around the technology—a social innovation.”

Such a prospect should give designers pause. If design interventions can precipitate an engaged public around a set of artifacts and practices (DiSalvo), the generalized lesson to draw is that urban technologies have the potential to reconstruct social relations in the image of the technology’s governing logic.

Artists offer new models for public expressiveness and maintaining a public realm that takes the local seriously. As we invent new interventions in public space, artists may give us the tools to lead the way.

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